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ABSTRACT

This book explores interpersonal skills for college administrators through analysis of fictional, but typical, scenes and dialogues set at a fictional "Elmdale College". The analysis and discussion use transactional analysis, gestalt psychology, and neuro-linguistic programming theories to help the reader understand the underlying processes that take place in different types of encounters between people. Individual chapters discuss the following skills: (1) establishing good contact and creating rapport; (2) active listening; (3) locating ownership of problems; (4) assertive behavior and dealing with requests and refusals; (5) using language well; (6) coping with criticism; (7) exploring personal issues; (8) staying with reality; (9) giving and receiving feedback; (10) interviewing the marginal performer; and (11) examining the role of personal beliefs in a skills-based approach. Appendixes list characters that appear in the scenes, chart the organizational structure of Elmdale College, and offer brief notes on transactional analysis, neuro-linguistic programming, and gestalt psychology. Includes an index. An annotated bibliography contains 17 recommended readings. (JB)

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# *ONE TO ONE*

## *INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR MANAGERS*

By

Colin Turner
and
Philippa Andrews

Published by The Staff College

The views expressed in this book are those of the authors. They should not be taken to represent the views of The Staff College.

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# CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Preface | | 5 |
| Introduction | | 7 |
| Chapter 1 | Making contact | 11 |
| Chapter 2 | Active listening | 21 |
| Chapter 3 | Whose problem is it anyway? | 29 |
| Chapter 4 | Requests and refusals | 39 |
| Chapter 5 | Cleaning up language | 49 |
| Chapter 6 | Coping with criticism | 57 |
| Chapter 7 | Exploring personal issues | 65 |
| Chapter 8 | Staying with reality | 77 |
| Chapter 9 | Giving and receiving feedback | 87 |
| Chapter 10 | Interviewing the marginal performer | 97 |
| Chapter 11 | Beliefs: bondage or liberation? | 107 |
| Further reading | | 113 |
| Appendix 1 | The characters | 117 |
| Appendix 2 | The college organisation | 119 |
| Appendix 3 | A note on transactional analysis, neuro-linguistic programming and gestalt | 121 |
| Index | | 126 |

# PREFACE

We decided to replace the publication **Developing interpersonal skills** (Turner 1983) as it was getting out of date. However, as the need for better interpersonal skills among college managers has never been greater than in the present period of change, we have expanded from the original one book to the following three so as to incorporate much new material.

The first book, **Transactional analysis in management** (Hewson and Turner 1992) replaces and adds to the first three chapters of the original book.

This book, **One to one,** deals with interaction skills between individuals or very small groups. It replaces and adds to chapters 5 to 9 in the original book.

A further publication, expected to be published in 1994, will be concerned with group and team behaviour, and will replace and add to chapters 10 to 12 in the original book.

All three books are set in the context of an imaginary college, and the skills which are described and analysed are drawn from practical examples of staff dialogue.

In this book each of the main chapters has been written jointly by the two authors. For those readers who need it, Appendix 1 lists the characters mentioned in the dialogue. They are of course fictional, and neither the college nor the staff make any reference to any real person or college. We have also added a brief note on the organisational structure of the college for those who like to have that context (Appendix 2).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Philippa Andrews trained as a teacher, but on graduating as a BEd, went into journalism and after working on a provincial paper became publications editor at the Further Education Staff College (as The Staff College was then known). She left there on starting a family and has since worked as a freelance editor from her home in Bath in between bringing up her two children. She has completed first level training in transactional analysis and group dynamics.

Colin Turner worked in schools and higher education and then at the Further Education Staff College where he introduced the first interpersonal skills programmes which he subsequently developed over the next 20 years. He has been trained at various levels in transactional analysis, co-counselling and neuro-linguistic programming. He lives in Wells in Somerset.


## Acknowledgements

Although our understanding of interpersonal skills has come from many sources over the years, we would particularly like to acknowledge our debt in our own learning of transactional analysis (TA) to Julie Hewson and Mary Cox, and of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to John Seymour. The model of marginal performance interviewing used in Chapter 10 was introduced to Staff College programmes by Russ Curtis, a senior manager from the British Columbia Institute of Technology, and is adapted with little change here. The lists of metaphors and predicates on pages 16 and 17 we adapted from John Seymour's workshop papers and are reproduced here with his permission. Susan Leather designed the cover and the cartoons, and Pippa Toogood was responsible for layout and sub-editing and managing the project through its stages from first discussions to published book. Susan and Pippa took great interest in our work, gave us support and encouragement, and raised many queries and suggestions which improved the final text.

# *INTRODUCTION*

Elmdale College is a medium-sized college situated in a pleasant part of a city of 200,000 people. It lies about three-quarters of a mile from the centre in an area built up at the turn of the century, and for a spell in the 1930s, when new estates were springing up on the outskirts of the city, it became unfashionable and a little down at heel. However, over the past 30 years it has become one of the more desirable areas, and although many of the larger houses have been converted into flats, it has a very settled air.

The college is in one of several broad, treelined avenues full of large late-Victorian villas. It has two major sites at either end of a long road.

One site, the old further education college, consists mostly of a large four storey block built in 1964, and though the size and the expanse of glass is rather obtrusive in this area, it is for its style a sound and not unpleasant building. The grounds, which include lawns and silver birch trees besides the concrete drives and parking areas, are well cared for, though the effect is somewhat spoilt by the ubiquitous scattering of 20-year-old temporary huts. From the rear of the premises the ground gently drops to a valley with a stream and small lake, all now encompassed by a municipal park. Near to this site is the old redbrick university and an up-market retail area with plenty of small shops, offices and refreshment outlets. This site is officially known as Parkside.

At the other end of the road is the former grammar school, a mostly one-storeyed building generously spread round two or three playgrounds. It was built in the 1920s, but when it was reconstituted as a sixth form college in 1975, it was totally refitted and a new library and administrative block were added. At the same time, one wing of the old school with a separate street entrance was turned into an adult education institute, which also acquired two large villas in a street nearby.

Elmdale College was created two years ago by a merger of the FE college with the sixth form college and adult education institute (AEI). It has had to cope with a sharp decline of traditional industry in the city, most marked in machine tool and car component factories, but has benefited from a dramatic increase in office employment, particularly from relocated firms, and a steady increase in service industries and the caring professions. It has also responded

to the previously ignored needs of immigrant groups and adult returners. There has been strong support for GCSE and GCE Advanced level courses, carried over from the old sixth form college.

The vocational courses are mostly situated in the old FE college at Parkside where their specialist accommodation exists. The engineering and construction courses have been closed, but catering, hairdressing, beauty therapy, office studies, and art and design courses are going well.

In the other building are most of the non-vocational examination courses, plus business studies, and in a lavish suite provided by a local firm is the management studies section. Here also is the theatre arts department which has grown out of the adult and community education section. The social work courses are in one of the houses, and the pre-nursing, nursery nurses and playgroup leaders courses are in the old AEI near the creche.

Courses for adult returners, ethnic groups, adult literacy, ESL and special needs students, access, Open University and Open College tend to be fitted in anywhere where there is room that particular term.

A new principal, Helen Bassenthwaite, was appointed two years ago at the time of the amalgamation. She had been a vice-principal for a short time and before that an LEA adviser. Helen believes that her three main tasks are to create from the recently amalgamated parts of the college a common corporate identity, to market the college to maximise income generation, and to acquire the kite mark of British Standard 5750 for quality assurance. To this end she has recently made two key appointments: Ian Standon as Co-ordinator of Quality, and Christine Dolacinska as Head of Marketing.

Ian Standon is a senior lecturer in the Business Studies Department, and section head of adult training across business and secretarial studies. He is responsible for access courses, pick-up courses and women returner courses. As the co-ordinator for quality in the college he chairs the quality working party, and is a member of the college development team. He graduated in economics from Manchester Polytechnic, and has a background of middle management in the food industry, where he had experience of introducing BS 5750. He is 40, married for the second time (to an occupational therapist) and is supporting two children from his former marriage as well as two step children and a mortgage. He is hard working and ready to take things on, but seen by his colleagues as a little too easy going and likely to be put upon.

Christine Dolacinska is head of marketing on a management spine salary, one of the six directors who work to the principal. She has a languages degree from Sussex University, and first worked in France in trainee then middle management posts in marketing for an international hotel chain. After some years she returned to work in England for another company but was made redundant when it was taken over. This gave her a need and opportunity to

change direction, but she wanted to keep her marketing bias, so was delighted to be appointed to the college.

She is 33, living with a partner, and though without children as yet, is beginning to think of motherhood. Her partner works for a computer firm and is successful, but worries about the severe recession in his business, and they are concerned they may have over-extended their mortgage for their dockside flat. Christine is likeable and intelligent but not really an intellectual, and can be rather impatient with the slowness of academic life. She enjoys being affluent, dresses expensively and is certainly ambitious.

Ian and Christine are very active managers. The course of each day brings them into contact with many staff in varying situations. Sometimes they handle these exchanges well, sometimes badly. In the following chapters we will see them at work in various settings engaging with different people as they endeavour to sort out some of the everyday problems that come their way.

# CHAPTER 1

## MAKING CONTACT

Quality had become an issue in the college. Ian aimed to gain the desirable quality assurance standard BS 5750 for the college. For the moment he was exploring what was involved in total quality management, and with this in mind had arranged an early meeting with the chief catering technician, Jack Bradley. He arrived punctually at Jack's office at 8.30am. Jack, a laconic man in his late 40s, came in a few minutes later.

'Sorry about the delay. Would you like a quick cup of coffee before we get cracking?'

'No thanks. I think we should get down to business straight away. It won't take very long.'

'Fine,' lied Jack who, though not thirsty, liked to ease his way into the day's routine with a drink. 'Take a pew.'

Ian sat down on a chair, having removed a pile of papers from it. Jack half leant against and half sat on his desk.

'You probably know, Jack, that the management team wants the college to be seen as a high quality institution, and eventually they want to focus on BS 5750. As a first step I'm asking all key staff – not just the lecturers – to look at their internal customer chain.'

More jargon, thought Jack. 'I don't quite grasp what you mean. Don't follow you.'

'It just means listing, first, the ways in which you provide a service to other people; and second, the ways in which they provide a service to you. Is that clear?'

Jack had been at the college for 15 years and despite his relaxed attitude had always performed his job in a highly satisfactory manner. He never panicked, and was always efficient and reliable.

'Well, Ian, I just do my job. I have more contact with things and paperwork than people, y'know.'

'Not really, Jack. You look after all the equipment, it's true, but that's a service you provide for the head of department and other teaching staff, just as you get support from the office staff in putting your orders through, typing and so on.'



11

'It feels pretty pointless to me. Why do I need to write these things down. It's just a waste of time – and hold on a minute, this isn't about people criticising my work is it?'

Ian felt frustrated. Why on earth could not the man see the purpose of what was, after all, an extremely simple exercise which would not take long?

'We need to see eye to eye on this, Jack. It really is important that everyone does it. It will help the college to market itself if we get recognition for our quality management.'

Jack couldn't see the point. This was just more jargon. He thought that if people just got on with doing a good job, the college would be a success anyway. It had always been well-esteemed locally, even before the craze for marketing the college had caught on. Still it was obvious Ian wasn't going to give up, so he thought he might as well agree. Then he could get on with his work.

'OK, I'll do it, but I don't know if it'll make any difference to quality. When do you want it by?'

They agreed to a couple of weeks, and Ian left. As he hurried away he felt disturbed. He could hardly fail to notice Jack's unenthusiastic demeanour and tone of voice. This had happened to him a number of times. He seemed to get off on the wrong foot with many of the staff. It always seemed such hard work. Clearly he needed different skills to get this interaction to work.

## The initial contact (or hello)

The initial contact between two people is critical. If the initiator gets it wrong, then it may well be unrecoverable. If the contact is well made, then interaction can begin with some hope of success. There are other skills to use along the way and other things that can go wrong, but making good initial contact is the essential precursor to everything else.

Our common experience may well be that it happens easily with some people and badly if at all with others, but we may have little idea why this should be so. We simply assume that we get on with some people better than others, and that is all there is to it; or that the fault lies with the odd nature of the other person. If we have a low self-image we may think it is the fault of our own nature.

What we probably do not think is that there is a simple skill involved in choosing the right strategy for initial contact. Once we understand it, we can change our contact behaviour to suit the person and situation.

Consider Jack and Ian. They got straight off on the wrong foot. Jack likes to initiate any important discussion by some kind of activity or behaviour. In this case it was a cup of coffee, in other circumstances it might be to go to the pub or for a breath of fresh air before talking business. At a social event

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# ONE TO ONE

## INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR MANAGERS

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he would immediately get a drink, walk around greeting people, and so work himself into the situation.

Ian is very different. He feels uncomfortable if they cannot get straight down to business, starting to sort the problem out or exchanging necessary information, and only after that is done does he feel it is OK to have a cup of tea or enquire after how the other person is feeling.

The difficulty is that both Ian and Jack cannot understand why other people don't respond as they do. Jack sees Ian as too abrupt and business-like, Ian sees Jack as dilatory and procrastinating. Either of them can, however, decide to change by consciously developing the skill of meeting the other person in their preferred mode of contact. It is helpful to think of four possible types of contact:

1. contact via joining in some act or behaviour before moving on to the thinking or feeling level;
2. contact via joining in some thinking activity before moving on to a feeling or behaviour level;
3. contact via exchanging feelings, before moving on to a thinking or behaviour level; and
4. contact via a very gentle and quiet behaviour mode before gradually moving to a thinking or feeling level.

This fourth state is most frequently the state that Jack is in at work. He likes a quiet time to reflect, some occasional chat, and a cup of coffee before he is ready to engage with anyone at a thinking, feeling or more active behavioural level.

Imagine Ian going over to see Wendy, another member of staff. He could open with any of the following, which he could select according to her personality.

1. 'Come down to the Arts Block foyer. There is something I want to show you and then pick your brains on. On the way we can say hello to Sylvia – it's her birthday today.'
2. 'Hello, I've got this problem I would like your advice on. This is the position...'
3. 'Hi, how are you feeling. You look as though you had a wild night. How did the party go ... Look, I need your advice...'
4. 'Hello Wendy,' (pause). 'I'll just sit a minute and get my breath and collect my thoughts,' (pause). 'That's a lovely plant on your desk,' (pause). 'Can I talk about a problem I've got?'

In using such contact strategies, it is important to remember that we only need to remain in that mode until initial contact has been made, and that may take no more than a sentence or two.

We have another clue to the failure of Jack and Ian to establish contact in the language they used. There is evidence scattered about in Ian's speech that

he is particularly comfortable experiencing his world visually. Notice for example the use of 'to be seen', 'to focus on', 'clear', 'look after', 'see eye to eye'.

Jack's speech on the other hand suggests he prefers experiencing the world kinesthetically. Notice his use of 'get cracking', 'grasp', 'follow', 'contact', 'feels', 'hold on'.

We can only experience the world outside us through our senses – our vision, hearing, feeling, smell and taste. We can only make sense of that experience through internal and external language. Our language will give indications of whether we have a strongly preferred mode of experiencing the world, and in particular if that is visual, auditory or kinesthetic. We are not suggesting that people are all or nothing, nor that people who seem to be particularly strong visually cannot also have fine discrimination in feeling and hearing. It is just a preferred mode – but it does have consequences.

Ian, for example, has an office full of charts and diagrams displaying visually the information he needs. He has a VDU on his desk, pictures on the wall, and his desk is positioned so that he can see the view out of the window. He is good at remembering faces, is adept at finding his way round places via an internal map, notices how people dress, and really sees what is going on around him.

Jack does not really notice the state his office is in. It is set up for comfort, not for viewing. His battered chair is very comfortable, the walls are unadorned but on his desk he has an onyx stone he often strokes when feeling stressed. He also has a picture of his wife and children that he often looks at with great pleasure. He knows the texture and feel of all the objects around him though he would sometimes be hard put to describe exactly what they look like.

If Ian wants to relate better to Jack he needs to recognise these differences and allow for them. It is no good using complex diagrams and displays with Jack – he needs to get into the task, get a feel of it, and work it in his own way so he feels physically comfortable with it.

We can imagine them both after their unproductive exchange, described earlier on, going away thinking to themselves: 'I just can't see why Jack cannot understand it. I've made it clear enough, but sometimes I think I could explain it to him until I was blue in the face.'

'I don't know. I really can't get a grip on what he's about. If only it was something concrete that he wanted I could grasp it. I like to keep my feet on the ground, and I get lost with all this airy-fairy nonsense.'

One choice Ian has is to change his language when talking to Jack to meet his need for feeling his way into the task.

That, however, would not do for Lien who has an office next to Ian. She chose it because it had the least noise disturbance and she is very sensitive to

unwanted sounds. She is highly auditory – that is, she operates most comfortably in that mode. She is very alert to hearing the different tones in people's voices, and she picks up how they are feeling much more from their voice than from how they are looking or behaving. She is very articulate and much prefers explaining things orally to using diagrams or writing reports. In her office the VDU is not much used but she has complex auditory equipment for managing her day and her diary, and she carries a mobile phone and a miniature voice recorder with her round the college.

If she was commenting on the dialogue between Ian and Jack, she might say: 'Listen, you two. If you want a harmonious relationship you both need to change your tone a bit. You're not speaking the same language. So hear what the other is saying, and try to get on the same wavelength.'

**Figures 1** and **2** show some of the predicates and phrases commonly associated with the three modes; auditory, visual and kinesthetic. It is important, however, to remember that some people have no strongly emphasised mode, and even for those who have it is not always apparent in their language.



15

**Figure 1: Visual, auditory and kinesthetic metaphors**

**Visual metaphors**

I see what you mean
I want a different perspective
Try to see things my way
I have a vision of how it could be
Things are looking up
You have to recognise his point of view
I can see right through him
It is a very vivid memory
It sheds light on the matter
He's making a spectacle of himself
She's the image of her mother
Look on the bright side
There is a silver lining
What is his blind spot?
Try to picture it
Let's look at this closely
The outlook is dim
Things look black for her
They see eye to eye
I've got a hazy idea
It's a wild scenario
It is crystal clear
Show me what you mean
Turn a blind eye

**Auditory metaphors**

We're not speaking on the same wavelength
Tune in to this
I hear what you're saying
That's music to my ears
It was a ding-dong row
He's lost for words
It sounds good
Living in harmony
The accent is on ...
He turned a deaf ear
We've got some noise in the system
Tone it down a bit
She sounded a really discordant note
That rings a bell
That strikes a chord
I was struck dumb
She is calling the tune
There will be reverberations
He's shouting the odds

**Kinesthetic metaphors**

I'll tackle this head on
I've got a feel for this place
Maintain a sense of balance
Get a grip on yourself
He wants something concrete
She's as solid as a rock
It's a sticky situation
His feelings were hurt
She's a wet blanket
Dry as dust
He's a cool customer
I need a hand
He's not got the stomach for this
Things just flowed
She rubs me up the wrong way
Pull yourself together
Can you grasp what she's saying?
Hold on a minute
Scratch that recommendation
I feel it in my bones
My gut response
One step at a time
Hot-headed
We deserve a pat on the back



16

**Figure 2: Visual, auditory and kinesthetic predicates**

| Auditory | Visual | Kinesthetic |
|---|---|---|
| say | look | touch |
| accent | picture | move |
| question | bright | pressure |
| click | outlook | handle |
| resonate | focus | loose |
| rhythm | image | thrust |
| chatter | glisten | texture |
| tinkle | black | grasp |
| sing | colour | weight |
| wavelength | hazy | smooth |
| melody | insight | pushy |
| dissonant | vivid | rub |
| tone | glowing | tight |
| patter | scene | contact |
| resonate | visualise | sticky |
| hearsay | dim | shrug |
| drum | dark | solid |
| chirpy | clear | warm |
| loud | luminous | cold |
| harmony | perspective | itchy |
| monotonous | vision | rough |
| deaf | shine | insensitive |
| language | transparent | flow |
| speech | reflect | tackle |
| tune | gleam | turn |
| ring | golden | uptight |
| clash | opaque | tickle |
| dumb | spectacle | firm |
| scream | light up | lift |

| Olfactory | Gustatory | Non-sensory based |
|---|---|---|
| scent | flavour | think |
| stink | sweet | know |
| whiff | appetite | sense |
| reek | sour | understand |
| fishy | feed | notice |
| nosey | savour | decided |
| fresh | bitter | explain |
| acrid | choke | arrange |
| fragrant | spicy | recognise |
| air | bland | attend |

## ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING RAPPORT

Establishing rapport is not necessarily an easy business, but if we have not got rapport we haven't really got anything. At a minimal level it must exist for any kind of useful communication, and to work at a quality level of relationship we need high quality rapport. For those with whom we can establish easy and close relationships, without thought or difficulty, rapport seems to flow as a natural consequence of the closeness of the relationship. Two lovers sitting together on a sea wall, or two old friends exchanging memories seated round either side of the fire seem to have no need for the skills of establishing rapport. Yet equally there are many occasions when we need good rapport and it eludes us. Maybe we are over-concentrating on the substance of the interaction, for example on the questions at a selection interview, and we forget the importance of establishing that feeling of ease and comfort with each other that is the mark of good rapport. While it may happen naturally with those with whom we share intimacy in love and friendship, it certainly does not with those we dislike, or see as distant, or those who are simply strangers.

So what are the skills we can consciously deploy when we want to create and maintain rapport?

The most powerful is that of physiological matching. By this we mean that both the interacting persons assume a very similar state in a number of key dimensions. The most obviously observable of these is matching of body language. This would include matching:

- posture;
- orientation;
- weight distribution;
- gestures of arms and hands;
- gestures of legs and feet;
- facial expressions;
- eye contact.

If we return to our two lovers on the wall or friends by the fireside we will most probably find that they are matching each other to a fine degree without being aware of it in the slightest. When we are close to someone we will generally fall into the same posture, facial expression, gestures etc. quite naturally. When we are working professionally, however, and need to exercise skill consciously to create rapport, then we need two capacities. First, we need to have good sensory acuity through which we perceive others' physiology. Second, we need to be able to reproduce that with some elegance. Crude copying or matching will do more harm than good. If done skilfully, however, then the congruence between two people at the physiological level will generally ensure some feeling of rapport at the conscious level.

If we think back to Ian and Jack we can see another problem that sabotaged Ian's well-meaning attempts. Ian sat on a chair, in an upright business-like posture, as was his normal way, while Jack lounged against a table. Ian kept fairly immobile apart from emphasising his points with a cutting motion of his arm, while Jack shifted his stance several times and fidgeted with his hands. There was almost an opposite of congruence, and such mismatching is the traditional way of breaking off or preventing rapport, a useful skill to have when that is what you want to do, but for Ian yet another means by which he failed to get off on the right wavelength.

A second powerful mechanism is that of the voice. Obviously there are limitations to what we can do with our voices, but we can imagine a conversation between two people, one of whom has a light, high voice and speaks in rapid staccato sentences, while the other has a deep rather slow and quiet voice. A third person joins them. His voice is several decibels louder than the other two and he doesn't stop much once he gets going. His sentences are stretched out by one subordinate clause after another. The chance of rapport between these three is slight. The skilled person will match the volume, pace, rhythm, timbre and pitch in so far as she can. Remember this is not about mimicking, but about creating reasonable congruence at the physiological level.

Ian had failed to do this. Indeed he had never thought about it. He just spoke the way he always did. However, his rather cultured, slightly sing-song voice, and his longer drawn out phrases and sentences were in marked contrast to the rather short and to the point diction of Jack. There were other differences of timbre, speed and volume Ian could have noticed and matched, if he had wanted to create a greater rapport.

Matching is a way of reinforcing the others' behaviour and therefore making them feel at conscious or sub-conscious level that you are with them. When, however, the other person is in a resourceless state (very depressed for example) it is pointless simply to join them in reinforcing matching. The skilled person in that case has the option to lead the other person out of that state. This is done by first matching the person's state physiologically, then very gently moving out into a more positive or resourceful posture. The skill is in very gentle pacing. If the pace is right, the other person will most probably follow your movements. The same process can be done with the voice, for example by increasing the tone of urgency very carefully to move someone out of an apathetic speech pattern.

If rapport between two people still proves elusive after matching body and voice, it would be worth checking breathing patterns. It is a difficult skill to match another person's breathing pattern, though there are people who can do that, but at least it is worth noticing if there are very marked discrepancies. For example, if Ian had a rapid and shallow pattern of breathing and Jack had a low and deep pattern, then the consequences of this would be a series of

small but cumulatively significant incongruencies that affect the voice and body posture.

## Summary

The skills Ian needs first to develop are those of establishing good contact and creating rapport. These involve:

1. using the other person's preferred mode of initial contact;
2. identifying any strong preference for an auditory, visual or kinesthetic mode of framing their experience, and choosing appropriate language and other forms of communication (for example, charts as opposed to telephone conversations);
3. matching of physiology to create congruence, through body language, voice and breathing patterns. If necessary, matching then leading a person who is in a resourceless state.

## Note on the concepts

The concept of modes of contact comes from the section of transactional analysis known as process communication.

The concept of auditory, visual and kinesthetic modes is basic to the approach of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), as is the technique of physiological matching.

# CHAPTER 2

# ACTIVE LISTENING

When Muriel Edwards arrived for the appointment she had requested, Christine was unsure of Muriel's reasons for wanting to see her. Prior to her arrival, Christine had been trying to make inroads on her in-tray, and had just started to read a letter from a local restaurateur about day-release classes when Muriel broke her train of thought by knocking on the door and entering the office.

Muriel is a part-time teacher, an English graduate with journalistic experience, running short courses for women returners, and she is anxious to increase her hours of work.

'Er, I thought I'd come to see if you had any publicity work you'd like me to take on. I've got interested in the marketing of the college since I've seen how the women on my course gain terrific confidence during the few weeks they spend here – they really do change – and, er, it would be so much easier for them to find jobs when they leave if more employers had links with this place... (pause). Er, The danger is that once they lose the support we give them...' Muriel had started breathless, but now petered out.

Christine focused for a second on what she had said, though looking reluctantly at her still-replete in-tray. She agreed of course with the wider opportunities courses. They fulfilled a real need in the community, but at the moment she felt her prime responsibility was in helping establish the college's corporate image, setting up some quality markers, and of course generating income.

'Thank you for the offer. I'll let you know if there's anything I think of for you to do. Is there anything else?'

'Well, er, no. I suppose not. Thanks for seeing me,' finished Muriel, lamely.

As Muriel left, Christine turned back to her correspondence, but she felt vaguely uneasy. Why had Muriel not expanded on her ideas about how she could assist in marketing? All she had done was identify a need. She must have had something more to add, but what?

Muriel walked back along the corridor feeling very dissatisfied with herself. She knew she had failed to say what she had gone there for, that it needed someone like her, with her skills and experience on a trade journal, to improve



21

the college information sheet which circulated round local employers. But how could she say that when it was Christine herself who wrote it? She couldn't even tell whether Christine had really been listening to what she had said, let alone what she wanted to say.

So this was a conversation that failed for both of them. Both need different skills if they are to communicate successfully in the future.

## Active listening

If the first requirement for any successful interaction is the establishment of good rapport, the second must be the skill of listening to the other person. There are levels of listening. At the most casual level we roughly scan what is being said so that we can get on with something else but still hope to get a very general sense of what is going on and hear the odd key word that may alert us to the need to switch into more concentrated listening. Often this is the case with much domestic conversational exchange in the home, or with people we know whose talk is very predictable. The capacity to scan, or to switch on and off, is a useful skill in itself, sometimes necessary for sheer survival, but inevitably it misses much of what is said. A higher level of listening occurs when we do pay reasonable attention to the other person much of the time, but also allow part of our mind to wander on other activities, and occasionally find our concentration has totally slipped for a few moments. This is likely to be the case in much of our day-to-day work and social activity. We generally understand more-or-less what is going on, but are liable to misinterpret.

Neither of these levels is adequate when it is necessary really to understand what the other person is trying to communicate. We need, when appropriate, to increase our level of listening skills so that real and effective communication takes place. This collection of skills is often termed 'active listening', and the phrase highlights one key difference between this and the other two levels. In scanning or general listening, we take a very passive role. We open a channel to hear whatever comes our way, but do very little to take part in the listening process. Active listening involves a lot of activity by the listener, in order to notice not only what is being said, but how it is being said and what non-verbal signs or body language are also telling us. It also requires us to create a state in ourselves that encourages the other person to say what they were intending to tell us. This may require us to use some language ourselves, in order that the other person knows we are listening and is encouraged to go on. We can illustrate this best by looking at the exchange between Muriel and Christine.

Muriel and Christine failed the most basic test. What Muriel wanted to say to Christine was never passed from one to the other. It was a failed communication. What went wrong?



22

Christine is Muriel's manager. The onus is on Christine to make sure her listening skills are sufficient to carry out her job properly. She failed at several points.

First, she never really switched her mind off the work she was engaged in when her visitor knocked at the door. Part of her mind was still dealing with it, and Muriel saw several small signs that this was the case. Her eyes flicked down to the letter she had on the desk in front of her several times. She occasionally defocused. Once her eyes flicked to her in-tray and then to the clock on the wall before returning to Muriel. She also gave some signs, probably unconsciously, that she did not want the meeting to go on for too long. Her fingers were on the move all the time, and though it was probably out of her conscious awareness Muriel may have been picking up Christine's tapping foot under the desk.

Christine did not alter her body posture at all when Muriel came in, other than to look up from her letter. Throughout the short exchange she remained in her business-like, lets-get-on with-the job attitude, and this expressed itself in her facial expression, posture, tone of voice and general lack of encouragement.

All this behaviour is of course very useful when we don't really want to listen and are trying to get rid of the person as quickly as possible. Christine, however, really did want to hear what Muriel had to say. How could she have done it better?

What the initiator of an exchange needs to know straight away is whether she is intruding or is welcome to say her piece. She then needs to know that the other person is actually hearing what she is saying. Finally, she needs reassurance that the listener is retaining interest and wants her to carry on.

Christine could therefore have given a positive sign that she was prepared to give some time to Muriel and focus on what she had to say. For example, she could have got up from her desk, invited Muriel to sit down, pushed her work on the desk to one side with a comment like: 'We can get rid of that stuff for a bit', or 'It's a relief to have a break from all that'. Then a really welcoming comment inviting Muriel to open up. 'I'm interested to know what you have to say, Muriel.'

Once Muriel feels that she has permission to be there, then what she needs are signs that Christine is really concentrating on what she is saying. So whenever she looks back to Christine's face, she needs to see that there is eye contact, that her expression is one of interest and her body posture one of attention.

As she develops her ideas, she needs some verbal encouragement from Christine. This could be an occasional 'uh-uh' or 'yes, I see' or other para-linguistic forms of encouragement with accompanying nods or smiles.



23

Christine does not need to indicate she is agreeing with what is said, just that she is paying attention and will carry on listening to more.

Christine, as a good manager, also needs the skill of facilitating rather than closing up another's contribution. In the exchange quoted, Christine's statement was a typical blocker. It gave no encouragement for Muriel to develop her ideas further. 'Is there anything else?' is not so much an invitation as a polite indication that the conversation is nearly over. A much better response could have been: 'It sounds as though you have been thinking a bit about this – tell me more.' As she noticed Muriel's hesitation, she could have responded by: 'You seem to want to say something else – I'd really like to hear what it is.'

Of course, if Christine was very busy or felt she was not in the right state to deal with someone else's problem, she could be open about this and say, 'Muriel, what you have raised is important, and I want to do it justice, but this isn't a good time for me. Could we make another time so we can explore it fully?'

Christine may have been taking the view that it is up to professional workers to say what they want to say, not up to her to help them. That is a position she can take in her private life, but not as a skilled manager. Her job is to listen actively, and had she observed Muriel with greater sensory acuity she would have noticed the clues in the tone of her voice, her facial expression and body posture that there was something difficult she was trying to say. As it is, the communication never took place, and she failed as a manager.

24

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Active listening requires great self-discipline, and the best we can hope is that we pick up signals that tell us when it is very important to use high level listening skills. Even when we start listening with concentration, it is only too easy to let our minds momentarily drift away. Each of us has our own listening traps. We can demonstrate this by considering some of the listening behaviour of the staff at the college.

Christine's listening trap, as we have seen, is being preoccupied with the work she was doing, or thinking forward to the end of the interview to the work she will then continue.

Ben's trap is that he cannot tolerate silences or gaps in conversations. He must immediately fill them or he feels uncomfortable. So if the other person is the kind who pauses to gather her thoughts, then she will never get the chance to say what she wants to communicate.

Fay's trap is that she is so anxious to identify with other people that she will cap anything they are saying with a similar experience of her own. If they are having trouble with the principal, she will recount an even more dramatic event she had.

Eric's trap is his own curiosity. He is fascinated by almost everything, and wants to know all sorts of details or contingent circumstances which the other person had no intention of revealing because they are not essential to the message being communicated.

Muriel's trap, when she is a listener, is to think ahead to the next point she wants to make, so that as she formulates it in her mind she loses track of what is being said.

Janet also goes into her own thoughts but in her case her trap is to analyse and assess what is being said as it is being said, so that she fails to hear the next bit of conversation.

Curtis likes being in control, and in particular controlling the way things are going. He is a politician and union representative, and finds it difficult to let other people have unfettered time to explore their own thoughts.

Emmeline frequently finds she does not listen because she does not want to be there, and cannot in that situation buckle down to the hard work of active listening. Of course she shares this with many other staff. In addition she has a low boredom threshold. She finds it difficult to listen if she is not interested in the substance of the communication.

Selwyn's trap is that he finds it difficult to listen carefully to people he does not like much, or even to the people he is indifferent to. He can only listen well to people he likes.

Morag is very easily distracted. She is a good listener so long as her attention is not caught by outside stimuli – a conversation outside in the corridor, things she can see happening through the window, the noise of aircraft or traffic.



25

**Figure 3: What is your listening trap?**

1. Preoccupied with thoughts about on-going work.
2. Preoccupied with thoughts about activities after the end of this interview.
3. Wanting to ask questions to satisfy own curiosity.
4. Wanting to fill any short silences.
5. Wanting to have more control over what is going on.
6. Thinking ahead to the next question or statement you will make.
7. Analysing what the other is saying and so losing track.
8. Not wanting to be there.
9. Not liking the other person.
10. Easily distracted by outside stimuli.
11. Bored with what is being said.
12. Feeling the need to respond and take part.
13. Feeling insecure or anxious and so wanting to talk.

Jack's trap is the feeling that if he is to do his professional job properly he should respond to what is being said and take a full part in the conversation. He does not really believe that listening in itself is doing very much.

Finally, Lien's trap is that she feels anxious or insecure in many conversations and needs to talk rather than listen to relieve her anxiety.

It is likely that we all have more than one trap we habitually fall into, but knowing which they are will help us guard against that. **Figure 3** summarises the listening traps.

Most of us will be able to identify with at least two or three of these traps. If we are aware of them we have the choice to work out some strategies for ourselves to prevent falling into them so often.

## SUMMARY OF LISTENING SKILLS

**Do**:

- give all your attention to the person who is talking;
- look at the person at all times: give good eye contact;
- look at what she is telling you with her body language;
- show by how you sit/stand that you are interested;
- let your face be friendly and interested;
- take an interest in what is said and remember it;
- allow periods of silence for the speaker to think what to say;
- listen with an open mind, i.e. without judging what is being said;



26

- show that you are interested by giving signs of encouragement (nods, smiles, etc.);
- remember you are there to listen, so allow the speaker to do the talking.

**Don't:**

- let your body show indifference, impatience or criticism;
- stare or look impassive, without sign that you understand;
- show your opinion of what is being said;
- look away from the speaker;
- let your mind wander to other things;
- interrupt the speaker;
- fill in silences;
- spend time planning what you will say when the speaker finishes;
- make judgements about what the speaker is saying;
- pay attention only to the words: gestures also speak.

# CHAPTER 3

# WHOSE PROBLEM IS IT ANYWAY?

## IAN'S STORY

Ian found one Monday when he came into the office that he had a free hour and decided to tackle his paperwork. After leafing through a few circulars, he picked up a letter from the deputy head of one of the neighbourhood comprehensive schools, whom he had met socially a few weeks earlier. It read:

> Dear Ian
>
> I hope you don't mind me contacting you, but I want to ask a favour. We are the venue this year for the annual careers conference for sixth formers. I wondered if I could ask you to give a talk on careers that might follow on from a course in business studies – just an informal chat really. We have a number of students at Grassmede school who look as though they might want to go in that direction and there will be others from different schools. Of course they will have had some information from our own careers education sessions, but there is always a greater impact from someone from outside. It would be very useful if you could manage it. Only snag is that it's quite soon – Friday week in fact. I do hope you can help me.
>
> Best wishes
>
> Janet Muir

Ian cursed. He had theatre tickets for that evening, and he and his wife had been looking forward to the play. It was quite a dilemma. Of course, it might be possible to exchange the seats for another evening, but at this late stage it would probably have to be a Monday, which was never the same as starting off the weekend with something really interesting. Still, Janet had seemed a very nice woman. Perhaps he had better accept, though he'd have to do some preparation and find some slides or transparencies or something, goodness knows when. He'd promised to help paint a classroom at his stepson's school the weekend beforehand, and he had three meetings on evenings during the

week. It was for a good cause, though, and it was nice to do someone a favour. He decided to accept, as long as his wife didn't mind too much.

As he continued sorting through his post, the phone rang. It was a colleague who was supposed to be invigilating an examination that afternoon. He had toothache and wondered whether Ian could step in for him while he had an emergency appointment at the dentist. Ian played for time, saying he would have to check his diary for meetings, whilst he thought about it. It was the last thing he wanted to do that afternoon. It was extremely hot and he certainly didn't feel like being cooped up in an examination hall for hours. He checked his diary, hoping he could find a legitimate excuse. He didn't. Though a bit of spare time after lunch would have given him the chance to hunt out some visual aids for the career talk.

Feeling awkward, he muttered, 'Well, the thing is, Curtis, I haven't actually got any appointments this afternoon, but I really do need a bit of time to do some work. If you could try some other people, and then get back to me if they can't do it ...?'

'Actually, I've already done that. I really didn't want to ask you for another favour, because it's not long since you helped me out before, but if you can't manage it, you can't. I'll just have to cancel the appointment and soldier on. A pity, because they were doing me a good turn, squeezing me in like that.'

Ian felt really mean. How could he let Curtis invigilate when he had raging toothache? He caved in. 'Oh no. I couldn't let you do that. It doesn't matter. I'll do it for you. Don't worry. Just get your toothache sorted out.'

'Well, if you're sure. That's really kind of you, Ian. It's in the Gym and starts at two. Thanks, I owe you one.'

Sighing, Ian put the phone down as one of his junior colleagues poked her head round his door. It was Morag McDonald, a new lecturer in secretarial studies. 'I'm awfully sorry to barge in, but have you got five minutes?'

'Sure. Sit down. What's the problem, Morag?'

'It's the audio-typing equipment. It's just not adequate. For a start, most of the machines are really knackered. It's quite a strain for the students to hear the tapes unless they turn the volume up so much they get loads of background noise. And some of the foot switches don't work very well at all. When they're doing speed tests it's just not fair on them. The technician won't take any notice of me. He just thinks I'm fussing, I think. But really, I'm not. I think it's because my girls don't rate very highly in the college, just because they're female, and not particularly academic.'

'I'm sure that's not true, Morag. The college stresses that all students are valued, whatever the type of course they're on – it's even in the mission statement. The real problem is the resources. The equipment needs replacing and the department just can't afford it at the moment.'

'That's because all the money goes into the flashy IT equipment. People just forget about the bread and butter courses like mine. It's just not fair at all.'

'Tell you what, Morag, I'll have a chat with the technician and tell him things are really bad. Perhaps he'll be able to get some repairs done. And I'll tell the boss that you really do need some new machines if you're going to be able to teach the course properly – though I can't promise he'll listen. Okay?'

'Well, it might help. You've got a bit more clout than me. Thanks a lot.'

Morag walked out, and left Ian wondering whether he really did have much clout. So far, he had taken on three tasks that he did not want to do this morning. He decided to take a walk down to the printing department and enquire about the progress of some leaflets he had ordered. They should have been on his desk at least two weeks ago.

When he got down to the basement, where the printing department was tucked away, he found the head printer adjusting one of the machines. He waited for him to finish, and then enquired politely about his order.

'You know the leaflets I asked for, Mr Hodges? Have you got them ready yet?'

'Well, we've had a rush on this week, so they're not ready yet. Sorry about that. I'll make sure they're done by the end of the week though.'

Ian was furious. It was not the first time this had happened to him. He was sure other people's work got put in front of his. 'Well, actually, I need them right now.'

'As I said, I'm very sorry, but there's not a lot I can do for you today. We're a bit short-staffed, and this job I'm doing at the moment is going to take quite a while. It is for the academic board meeting tomorrow.'

'Yes, but I asked for these a long time ago. They should have been sent up last week. I shouldn't even have to come down and chase them up.'

The printer looked sullen and remained silent. He did not offer to speed things up. Ian felt there was no point in getting on the wrong side of him. It could make things even worse next time. Mr Hodges had power, because he controlled such a vital resource. Anyway, Ian always found it difficult to communicate his annoyance. He said: 'I'd appreciate it if you could try to hurry things along a little. You couldn't do them by Thursday, could you, then we could get them in the post by the weekend?'

'I can't promise, but I'll see what I can do.'

Ian left it at that, but felt really annoyed with himself. Why hadn't he insisted on Thursday? The printer hadn't compromised at all. It had been him again, just like it always was.

## Muriel's story

Emmeline, a finance officer, had been causing problems for Muriel. Most of the women on her 'return to work' course had children who were either

of school age or younger, and they were entitled to claim for child-care expenses while they were at college. The scheme was EC-funded and therefore no cost was involved for the college. There should have been no difficulties at all, but some of the women had complained to her that they had trouble getting hold of the claim forms from the administration department. Muriel had twice sent a memo to Emmeline Luckhurst, who was dealing with the claim forms, but on neither occasion had she received any response. She decided to call in, informally, but was not looking forward to it. She felt, being part-time, that no one listened to her.

'Excuse me Emmeline, have you got a moment?'

Emmeline had not looked up from her keyboard when Muriel walked into the open plan office. She did now, but not until she had finished typing a few more lines.

'Yes, what do you want?' she said briskly.

Muriel explained the problem. Emmeline was less than sympathetic. She was always immaculately turned out, obviously managed her own life efficiently, and couldn't understand why others didn't.

'If your ladies had applied during the first week of the course for the forms, they would have got them without any trouble. We had them all ready then. The trouble is they have been filed away by now'.

That's right, thought Muriel. Blame the system when it's really just a question of you opening the right filing drawer and getting them out. She thought of the women's first week in college. They were usually quite overwhelmed by the change in their lives, the adjustments they were making – too frantic to remember to get their EC forms right away.

'Do you think you could possibly let me have a few then, so that I can give them out? It might be easier.'

'Well, its quite irregular. They are supposed to get them from this office directly, but all right. '

Emmeline walked over to the filing cabinet and got out the forms, handed them to Muriel and turned back to her typing.

Muriel was seething. She had got the forms, but this in itself had proved Emmeline had been deliberately ignoring her women's requests because she didn't think that they – or their lecturer– were important. They had taken her just two minutes to retrieve.

She wanted to be angry, to say, 'look, these women have a genuine complaint, it's happened several times. It's got to be different in the future', but she felt her part-time status gave her no authority at all, and that whatever she said she would not be listened to.

## Commentary

Both Ian and Muriel had a bad day. They needed some other skills and different approaches to ensure for themselves more fruitful days in the future.

## So, whose problem is it?

A crucial question in all relationships is: 'How do I decide that something is wrong and that I ought to do something about it?'

This might seem a matter of common sense but it raises a fundamental issue – when have I got a problem, and if I have got one, is it really mine or is it someone else's? The ownership of problems needs to be clearly established so as to determine the appropriate kind of behaviour. The reason this cannot be handled just on the basis of common sense is that it is in the interests of many people to push their problem towards us and encourage us to own it as ours. It is our predilection to accept other people's problems as our own, and then to engage in all sorts of complex and often painful behaviour to cope with 'our' problem. Ian certainly shows this predilection. We can take him as our individual focus to work through a model for determining the ownership and nature of problems.

The first question he can ask of any particular behaviour is: 'Is this something I value or appreciate?'. If it is, then his appropriate behaviour is to express appreciation or give some kind of positive reinforcement.

If it is not something he appreciates, the second question to ask himself is: 'Is it causing a problem or not?' If it is not causing a problem there is no need to respond to it in any way.

If it is causing a problem, then his next three questions aim to locate the ownership of the problem. So Ian asks in turn:

'Is it causing me a problem?'

'Is it causing the other person a problem?'

'Is it causing us both a problem?'

If Ian feels that the first response is the most accurate, then he needs to ask a further question about the activities or behaviour that cause him a problem. Are they creating a problem which has a practical or tangible effect; or alternatively are they creating a problem because they go against his value system or affect his feelings? He will need different strategies for each.

A decision on ownership of the problem is a critical one, and it is important that what is being said here is clearly understood. The problem is owned by the person who is initially bothered or concerned about the situation. It is he or she who defines it as a problem. The person who is the cause may not feel there is any problem, and even if he does may have no concern to do anything about it. Ownership of the problem is not about responsibility for, or cause of, but is about concern for the situation. The person who owns the problem

is the person who wants change, not necessarily the person who needs to change.

In situations where people are working together, one person's identification of her problem may quickly lead to a mutual ownership of the problem by those involved in the situation. Where one person identifies her problem and wants a change, it does not necessarily become a mutual problem, but it does not mean either that people can ignore it. In many practical settings their co-operation in helping her change the situation is something she should reasonably expect, and in some cases it is essential. The value of identifying problem ownership is first because it helps us choose the most appropriate way of responding, and second identifies those who are compulsive problem collectors.

Maybe that is what Ian is. If we look at the problems he took on in the first hour of his day, we can see that certainly the first is simply someone else's problem. His compulsion to solve the deputy headteacher's problem seems out of proportion to the cost involved, and certainly it would be reasonable for him to assume she could find some other solution. The second is also someone else's problem. He has no responsibility for solving it, but Curtis manages to dump it on him, inconvenient though that is. Ian should be able to sympathise with Curtis' position without feeling the compulsion to make

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it his. There would be standard ways of covering emergencies in any organisation and Curtis, since he has the problem, needs to take responsibility to get it solved. If this analysis is sounding rather harsh, for we should surely expect a person to come to the aid of a suffering colleague, it is worth noting that almost certainly many of the people who had already refused Curtis were in fact in a position to help him. Ian is in danger of becoming a sitting duck for all the hard-luck stories.

The third problem was of a different nature. It was a mutual problem. Morag had a problem with her machines, but if her version was true, then Ian also has a managerial problem in making sure the equipment in his section is adequate, and the technician is doing his job in giving the equipment adequate care. However, Ian takes the problem – almost eagerly – with little investigation, and no thought that this was a mutual problem that might involve both of them in problem-solving. He may still have some nasty shocks awaiting him when he begins to 'solve' it. If Ian wants to make his life better organised, one thing he might learn to do is never to use the phrase, 'leave it with me'. For some people it is literally a killer.

His fourth problem really was his. He was the one upset and inconvenienced. The contrast is strong, however, for in this instance Mr Hodges determinedly refuses to take on the problem, even though it is arguably a mutual one. When Ian leaves he still has sole ownership.

When ownership is clearly located, it suggests the available courses of action. These can be summarised as follows.

## If another has the problem

I have a choice. I have no obligation to help other people with their problems unless I am paid to do so. I have the right – and it is perfectly proper to exercise it – to say, however nicely, 'that is your problem', and leave. Of course it is much easier said to a comparative stranger, such as the headteacher in Ian's first item, than to a colleague as in the second item. If I choose to help, then the basis of that help must be to facilitate the other finding a solution to his or her problem. At no stage should I take on the problem as though it was mine and so take responsibility for its resolution, though the other person may well manipulate my sympathetic response to push me towards such an action.

## If I have the problem

I have four possible choices.

I can change myself – for example by learning better negotiating skills for handling printers or using some assertive skills.

I can change the person responsible for the problem – for example by persuading technicians to change their priorities or working practices, or instigating disciplinary procedures.

I can change my environment – for example by delegating some work I normally do to another person, or by working in the same room as someone I want to supervise closely.

I can decide to live with the problem and decide to take no action. Note that this is not the same as doing nothing. It is a positive decision. So Ian might decide to live with a bloody-minded printer, because the gain of doing something was less than the cost of expending so much energy.

## If we both have the problem

There are three choices.

First, both of us can decide to live with the problem.

Second, either one of us can deal with our part of the problem by one of the methods described in the previous paragraph.

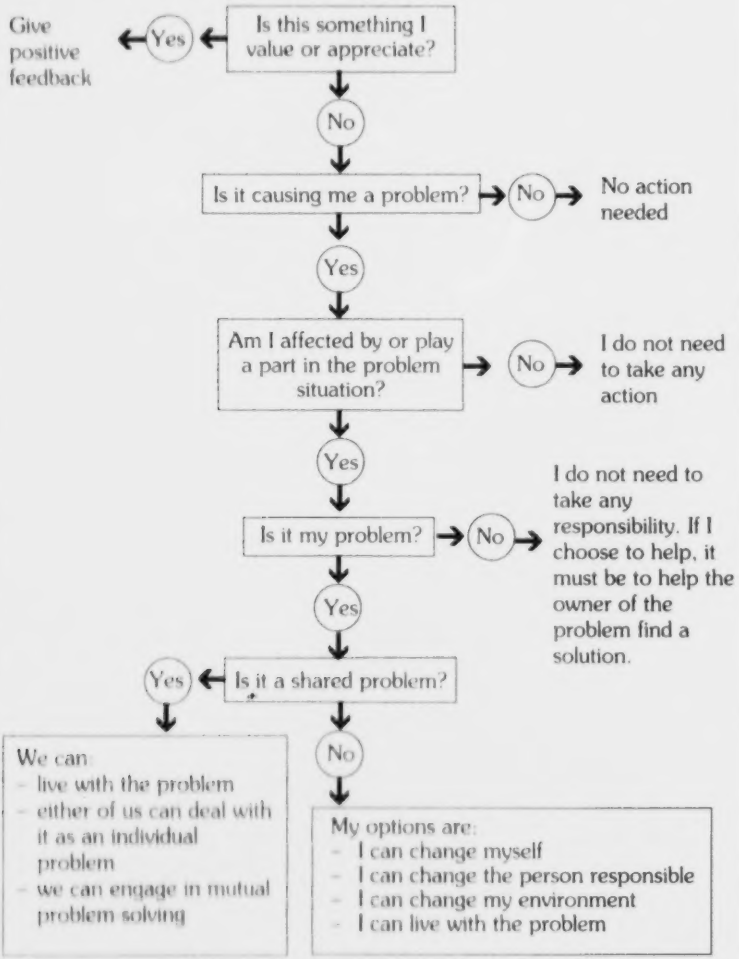
Third, we can engage in mutual problem-solving. Whatever technique we use, it is likely to involve us in a rational assessment of options in terms of solutions related to desired outcomes and personal costs and investments.

We need to emphasise again that this kind of analysis is not about avoiding work or being unco-operative with colleagues. It is about making decisions about whether to get involved from the basis of understanding ownership of the problem, and then operating with autonomy rather than under compulsion. The compulsive problem-seizer like Ian is in the end less useful to his colleagues because he is never quite in control. After all, in the examples cited, if he had not taken on the problem of the deputy headteacher, he would have had space to help his toothache stricken colleague.

## Summary

**Figure 4** shows, in a diagrammatic flow chart, a summation of the above questions and choices.

**Figure 4: Flow chart**


Is this something I value or appreciate?
Yes
Give positive feedback
No
Is it causing me a problem?
No
No action needed
Yes
Am I affected by or play a part in the problem situation?
No
I do not need to take any action
Yes
Is it my problem?
No
I do not need to take any responsibility. If I choose to help, it must be to help the owner of the problem find a solution.
Yes
Is it a shared problem?
Yes
We can:
- live with the problem
- either of us can deal with it as an individual problem
- we can engage in mutual problem solving
No
My options are:
- I can change myself
- I can change the person responsible
- I can change my environment
- I can live with the problem

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# CHAPTER 4

# REQUESTS AND REFUSALS

Muriel and Ian are pleasant people. They do not wish to cause difficulty to anybody, and they go out of their way to be helpful and considerate. Yet these general characteristics are getting in the way of their interacting skilfully and usefully with other people. Not every failure at relating to others derives from the harsh or inconsiderate side of our nature. Disastrous interactions can be caused by those characteristics commonly held to be good and desirable.

This is Ian's problem. There is no doubt that he is a kind person concerned with the wellbeing of his fellow workers. Yet in the course of one hour his failure to curb his good nature has left him over-burdened with new tasks and probably feeling some underlying resentment he is unable to admit to himself (see previous chapter). At this stage we can notice that he has found it difficult to say no to people on two separate occasions, even though in both cases it caused him difficulty. Further, he failed to carry his point with the printer that he required reasonable service. We can also notice of Muriel that she is aware of her anger and frustration at being unreasonably thwarted in efforts to help others, but is unable to express that. Nor is she able to express any criticism of her head of department, but instead rationalises her inactivity by a belief that nobody would take any notice of someone in her lowly position.

They are both in need of some assertive skills. To acquire these effectively, they each need to change their belief systems.

## THE BASIS OF ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR

We are all likely to face some commonly recurring situations which cause us feelings of embarassment, guilt or inadequacy. Specific situations that particularly affect us may well be drawn from one of the following situations:

- dealing with bad service;
- saying no to requests;
- facing prejudicial criticism from others;
- confronting another person with feelings or thoughts on what they have done or have failed to do;
- dealing with well-intentioned or legitimate criticism.

When we respond to situations which activate such feelings, we are likely to fall into one of three kinds of behaviours.

We can be *submissive*. We can agree to the demand, go along with the situation, justifying our stance to ourselves by saying that it doesn't really matter to us, or isn't worth a fuss.

We can be *passive* but manipulative, making people feel uncomfortable around us even though we actually acccept the service or comply with the request.

We can be *aggressive*. We can get worked up and angry, and engage in a fight. We determine to make sure no one takes us for a ride. We aim to win, but because we leave the incident with bad feelings (and very often the likelihood of later come-backs) our victory is very qualified.

A fourth stance is that we are *assertive*. This is the most satisfactory, least damaging, and most productive. Assertion training aims to increase our own self-esteem and self-respect, and hence our respect for others, by increasing our ability to respond assertively. Assertion is the capacity to express our ideas, opinions or feelings openly and directly without putting down ourselves or others. It involves standing up for our own rights in a way that does not violate another's rights. It involves expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways. It is neither an aggressive nor a defensive stance. It does not assume you can get what you want all the time: indeed, it does not see interactions based on winning or losing. The assertive person is open to negotiations for workable compromises. It is a process of interacting which is not manipulative but straight.

It is easy to make a series of statements about the value of assertion and believe in them. It is much more difficult to operate them consistently in practice, and no one is going to be able to do this all the time. We cannot always stop ourselves being manipulative, nor prevent ourselves from being manipulated. For example, our rational conviction that it is a normal happening for anyone to make a mistake and we should therefore not feel guilty if we do so ourselves, does not always hold up when our boss reacts to a particular error we have made. Nevertheless, assertion training can improve our capacity to handle situations better more often.

It is no good knowing the techniques of assertion unless we first accept our basic assertive rights as human beings. We need to accept them not as interesting hypotheses or part of a rationally defensible position, but as fundamental beliefs on which we build our lives. Assertive rights are formulated in slightly different ways by different writers, and the following list incorporates statements from a number of sources.

## List of assertive rights

### *You are the ultimate judge of yourself*

This is the prime condition from which all else follows. It asserts that you are the ultimate judge of your own behaviour, thoughts and emotions, and take responsibility for their initiation and consequences on yourself. In everyone's life there will be many people who have attempted to erode that right – parents, doctors, sons and daughters, clergymen, teachers, friends, politicians, enemies. There have been very many people telling individuals what they are, what they should think, how well they are doing, what they should do. This right simply asserts that you make decisions about who you are, what you are worth, what you should do, how well you have done. It is not a selfish or irresponsible stance. It does not mean you do not listen to others, but it does mean you do not give them power over you. If you are ultimately responsible for yourself, you have no alibis, no way of blaming other people or outside events for your own life.

### *You have the right to make mistakes*

Everyone does make mistakes. No one has the right to expect anyone to be perfect, so you have the right not to feel guilty when you make a mistake. You also have the right, of course, to face the consequences of your own mistakes.

### *You have the right to say no*

Not only have you the right to say no without feeling guilty, but you have the right not to have to justify yourself. You may decide you want to offer explanations but no one has the right to demand them of you. A demand for justification is generally a precursor to an attempted manipulation.

### *You have the right to offer no reasons or excuses for your behaviour*

It is your behaviour and not someone else's, and you have the freedom and right to decide on your behaviour without having to justify it. You may decide you wish to, or that in the circumstances it is reasonable to do so, but no one has the right to insist you do.

### *You have the right to say 'I don't know', to change your mind, to say 'I don't understand'*

### *You have the right to say 'I don't care'*

This is an important right, because it is by implying that you should care that guilt can be used as a manipulator by others. You are not required to care about everything or everyone, and if you choose not to care about your old aunt or an endangered species of duck, it is no one else's business. This is what Ann Dickson (1982) calls the compassion trap, and it is particularly relevant to women. You have the right to consider your own needs as well as those of others. Your needs are not necessarily more important, nor are they less important than the needs of others – just equally important.

### *You have the right not to take responsibility for solving other people's problems*

However helpful you may wish to be, ultimately other people are in charge of their own problems, and you have the right to decide how far you wish to become involved in them, if at all. Other people may try hard to drag you in, and manipulate your guilt feelings, but they have no right to off-load their problems onto you.

### *You have the right to express your feelings and opinions*

These are part of you, they do not need justifying or defending, and there is no reason why they should be suppressed or discounted by you.

### *You have the right to be treated with respect, listened to, and taken seriously*

If people are not prepared to do so, you have the right to assert this position. It is particularly important in boss-subordinate and male-female relationships when these rights are most at risk.

It is very important that the meaning of assertive rights is clearly understood. These are basic inalienable rights possessed simply by virtue of belonging to the human race. It does not mean that you should go around all the time looking for reasons to exercise them. There will be many times when people make a point of not exercising their rights. Situations are always specific and require sensitivity and common sense in response. The key word however is 'choice'.For the person secure in the understanding of her rights, the choice is real. She can choose to assert her rights or be passive and ride with it on any particular occasion.

Assertion training is about creating that freedom of movement, assuring the capacity for choice, so that we are not victims of the learned behaviour of our childhood and the manipulation of other people. With such choice we

can operate in a way that is rewarding for us, but as important, we can give proper respect to other people.

## Dealing with bad service

This section considers the techniques to be used when we are faced with poor service when we are reasonably entitled to expect better.

Ian received poor service from the head of the printing department. He wanted his order completed on time, and if it had not been done he wanted it given immediate priority. Mr Hodges did not want the same outcome. He wanted to shrug off the complaint and not be pinned to any urgent restitution. Typical phrases used by those excusing their bad service are:

- it's not my responsibility;
- I haven't the power to do anything;
- it looks all right to me;
- you must have done something to it yourself;
- I'm overworked. It's the best I can do;
- you're holding up other customers;
- come back later.

All these are not legitimate responses. They attempt to avoid responsibility, induce guilt, offer alibis – in fact do anything but respond to the request. Ian was not good at handling this. He was easily hooked by such bait, and then he was lost.

How might he learn to handle such situations successfully?

The most useful and effective technique is known as 'broken record'. It consists simply of repeating your request over and over again, and avoiding any offered side-tracks. It is a very easy technique to use once it has been practised a few times. As an example, imagine a dialogue between Christine, whose listening skills may be poor but whose assertive skills are good, and her secretary.

Christine: 'Deirdre, I will need to have this letter retyped before I can sign it.'

Deirdre: 'I'm rushed off my feet today. Jean is away. So I can't take the time to get everything dead right today.'

Christine: 'I guess it is difficult for you today, but I want the letter retyped.'

Deirdre: 'Couldn't you make the changes in pen. It would help me.'

Christine: 'No, Deirdre, I need the letter retyped.'

Deirdre: 'You know, Ms Dolacinska, I wouldn't have had all this trouble if we had had our printer back from repair. You promised it for today, and this manual feed one takes ages.'

Christine: 'Well, that must be very annoying for you, but I want the letter retyped.'

Deirdre: 'Oh, well. I suppose you'd better leave it there. I'll try and get it done.'

Christine: 'Thank you, Deirdre. I will be back to sign it at 4 o'clock.'

It is important to note the following characteristics of this exchange:

- Christine did not respond to and take up any of the excuses, complaints or other traps, other than by simply indicating she had heard what Deirdre had said.
- She did nothing else but repeat, with assertion and without aggression, her request for the letter to be retyped.
- In order to do that Christine needed to believe she had a right to have the letter properly typed. If she was at all wavering about that in her mind, she would find it difficult to persist so single-mindedly with her request.
- She remained calm and uncritical. It is essential to this technique of broken record that no critical judgements are made. For example, if Christine had at some stage said irritably, 'Look, it's your job to type letters properly. I shouldn't have to come and tell you,' then Deirdre no longer has to think of diversionary statements herself. Christine has done the job for her, and she can happily get away from the main issue of retyping by following up the criticism, for example: 'What right have you got to tell me my job?'

  If Christine keeps to the technique of broken record, then in the end (and it may require some persistence with some people) Deirdre is faced with a position where she either has to decide to retype the letter or refuse to do so. All other diversionary avenues have been closed off.

You might ask what happens if both parties are assertive and practise this technique. Who wins? The purpose of assertion is not to win but to reach a position which satisfies your right to expect reasonable service, and the solution can be a negotiated workable compromise. This would be absolutely necessary if both parties were assertive, and is likely to be the solution even when that is not the case. Being assertive does not mean driving through life as a winner, leaving behind scores of defeated adversaries.

A workable compromise in this case might be achieved as follows.

Deirdre: 'OK, I will type it again. It's a bit shoddy. But I must get this report done for the registrar to catch the post. If your letter is not urgent, can I do it after that and risk missing the post?'

Christine: 'That's fine. A day won't make any difference.'

Ian's encounter with the printer could have reached a more successful conclusion than a vague promise that his leaflets would be done as soon as possible, if he had used the technique of repeating over and over again, 'Yes, Mr Hodges, but I must have the leaflets on Thursday,' and refused to follow any deviations from that.

12

## Saying no

Saying no to requests is something we all find difficult sometimes. Each individual will find it easy with some people over some issues, but often enough with other people and other issues it is hard, and if it is done at all it probably leaves us feeling guilty.

To whom is it most difficult for you to say no – the salesman or evangelical at the door, a stranger, a work colleague, your principal, a lover, your spouse, your parents, your children? It will vary for different people, but in general it becomes more difficult the closer we are to a person. It is when we want to say no that manipulation of some of the childhood feelings we still carry around with us is most pervasive. Many of us will have retained a collection of beliefs which resembles some or all of the following:

- saying no will hurt or upset people;
- saying no is self-centred and uncaring;
- saying no will make people not like me;
- saying no on small things looks petty and inflexible;
- saying no will make me look rude and abrupt.

Behind these statements is a belief that other people are more important than me – I am not entitled to put my own wishes or needs first. If I do, it is quite proper I should feel bad about it. This is such a pervasive problem it is not surprising that two of the early best-sellers on assertion training were called: **Don't say yes when you want to say no**, and **When I say no, I feel guilty**.

To recover the freedom to say no when you want to, it is essential to internalise two beliefs:

- I have a right to say no.
- When I say no, I refuse the request, not reject the person.

It may not be easy to accept these, for they go against years of conditioning and training.

The basic technique for saying no to persistent requests is the use of 'broken record'. It will be more difficult than when used to insist on good service because the potential for manipulation is greater.

Take, for example, the following exchange in the staff room.

Eric: 'Lien, we've all been going on about the state of the timetable for a long time. I'm fed up with it. Nothing gets done. So we are going along to Christine to let her know what we think. Are you coming?'

Lien: 'No thanks.'

Eric: 'Come on. The more that go the better. We need to be there in numbers.'

Lien: 'No. Count me out.'

Eric: 'The other three section heads are all coming. You'll be the only one not there.'

Lien: 'Well, that's too bad.'

Eric: 'Look,we really need you. You put things so much better than the rest of us. You're really good with words. I'm not. I get tongue-tied.'

Lien: 'I'm sorry but I really have got something else to do right now.'

Eric: 'It's really more important than this? So, we can rearrange the time when you can come.'

Lien: (more uncertainly) 'I don't think I'll be much help to you.'

Eric: 'Well, you'll have to do what you think is right – but I'm really disappointed – particularly after I helped you out in that emergency you had last week. That wasn't easy for me, but I believe when the chips are down we stand together and help each other. Do you?'

Lien: 'Well ...'

Eric: 'And I suppose you will enjoy the benefits after the rest of us have done the hard work.'

Lien: 'Oh, I suppose I'd better come.'

If Eric could not get her one way, he would get her another. As she gradually weakens, and from her fourth response gradually loses touch with the broken record, his chances of getting her to accept, or alternatively of getting her to lose her temper, are high.

Apart from holding on to the broken record technique, there are one or two other practices that will very often help in saying no.

*Ask for more information* about what is involved before giving an answer. This is not always appropriate, but if someone has asked you to give a presentation at a careers convention you can ask for details about what is expected, when it will start and finish, whether there is a fee, etc. before saying yes or no.

*Ask for time to think about it*. No one has a right to expect an immediate answer of you, and to ask even in a formal meeting for a few minutes to think about a request is an eminently reasonable response.

*Don't give excuses for your refusal*. A polite but firm no is all that is needed, and excuses will only cloud and confuse the interchange and reduce you from being assertive to being apologetic. Very often it is clear to both parties that the excuses are not genuine. Remember that one of your basic rights is of saying no without having to justify it.

*Do not hang around*. It is a strange phenomenon that, after we have turned down a request, we feel some necessity to stay around the person. It probably arises from our need for assurance that our refusal will not be followed by personal rejection, or our worry that we have hurt the other person in some way. It is part of our guilt in saying no. The general rule is that

after refusing a request we move away unless there is other business to transact, unless it is socially clearly inappropriate, or unless our common sense tells us that it is important to stay.

*Take personal responsibility for saying no.* It keeps the transaction cleaner and less liable to manipulation if you say 'I don't want to' or 'I don't feel like it' rather than 'I can't' or 'my boss wouldn't approve'.

*Practice saying no.* For some people the word 'no' is a remarkably difficult one to use, and they will engage in all sorts of verbal contortions to avoid saying it, even when refusing a request. It is valuable to practise saying the word, hearing what it sounds like, and getting used to what it feels like, until a greater level of comfort and familiarity is reached.

We conclude this section by repeating a sentence which exposes the heart of the problem: **you refuse the request, not reject the person**. If that can be fully accepted, saying no ceases to be a problem of great import.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

In this chapter we have:

- defined the nature of assertive behaviour and distinguished it from aggressive or passive behavior;
- listed the assertive rights on which assertive behaviour is based;
- described the skill of insisting assertively on reasonable service;
- described the skill of refusing requests.

# CHAPTER 5

# CLEANING UP LANGUAGE

Christine was sitting in the board room, listening rather desultorily to a discussion on the franchising arrangements with the local polytechnic, now grandly renamed the Great Western University. She was not quite sure why she was required to be there, and no doubt it was her mounting frustration that made her react in the following way.

Jim: 'Well, we all know we must get hold of this first year of the degree for the college.'

Christine: 'Could you rephrase that, Jim.'

Jim: 'What do you mean? It's obvious enough. You have to get hold of the first year work if the college is to have any kind of future.'

Christine: 'No I don't.'

Jim: (clearly puzzled). 'You've lost me. We all know what our rivals are up to, and ...'

Christine: (interrupting). 'No, I don't'.

Jim: 'Oh. Come on. Everyone knows that.'

Christine: 'I don't. My mother-in-law doesn't. My brother doesn't. The vicar doesn't.'

Jim: 'Now you're being silly'.

Christine: 'Well, Jim, maybe I'm silly to you. But you make me very annoyed when you keep on telling me what I know, what I think, what I have agreed. What you think are your ideas – no one else's. So for goodness sake, state them as your own. Let's have a few less of "we all know" and "everybody feels".'

Andrea, the vice-principal, who was chairing the meeting, intervened before things got any more acerbic.

'Christine's putting it a bit sharply, Jim, but it would help if you, and indeed the rest of us, owned our own statements by using "I" and "me" rather than "we" or "you".'

Phil intervened mischievously to close off this particular exchange: 'And we all know that you have to agree with the vice-principal,' he said to general laughter.

Though Jim may feel that this was a fuss over nothing, it is in fact a key interpersonal skill. The habit of attributing statements to a generalised other,

through the use of the pronouns, 'we', 'you', 'everyone', rather than 'I' is a distancing device. It gives us a kind of alibi, by sharing our statements with everyone else. It arises generally from lack of confidence in stating to others, 'this is what I think' or 'this is how I feel'. By linguistically joining others in support of the statement, the speaker may feel safety in numbers. He or she is less exposed. It is, however, annoying to the others and reduces the sharpness and effectiveness of interpersonal exchange. It is useful to establish in any committee or meeting that there is a ground rule about taking personal responsibility, and not speaking for others.

There is a further point about personal responsibility that arises from the above exchange. Christine attributed her irritability to someone else, implying that it was not her fault as she was forced into that behaviour. In fact, of course, it was her choice and she could have chosen to react in a number of other ways. By blaming Jim for her choice of feeling, she effectively takes herself off the hook of having to justify either to herself or others that particular negative feeling of irritability.

A more honest statement by her would have been: 'I am angry when you attribute your ideas to me.'

Christine was somewhat of a purist in language. She liked to use words precisely, and on the whole was successful in doing that. Her habit of correcting others did not always endear her to them, but she believed that a great deal of damage occurred in relationships through misunderstandings caused by slipshod language. Her experience in the meeting that morning made her particularly attentive to the language she heard as she carried out her duties during the rest of the day. These are some of the conversations she overheard.

Ian: 'You can't get the printer to do anything.'
Lien: 'What do you mean? I never have any problems with him.'
Ian: 'I don't mean you personally, Lien. I just find him generally unhelpful. Its always such a struggle to get him to deliver on time.'

Muriel: 'No one in the office ever takes any notice of me. It's because I'm only part-time.'

Lecturer: 'I can't come to play squash on Thursday lunchtime. I'd love to, but I always do the shopping then.'
Friend: 'Too bad.'

Ian: 'I can't tell Janet Muir I'm too busy to go to her careers' convention.'

Secretary: 'I hate my job now. My new boss humiliates me.'
Friend: 'Does she? That's awful.'
Secretary: 'She's always pointing out my mistakes in front of other people.'
Friend: 'I wouldn't stand for that. I'd tell her.'
Secretary: 'I couldn't possibly do that – not to her.'

Emmeline: 'What we need in this office is to be able to make our own decisions.'
Friend: 'Too right.'

Student: 'This guy who teaches me sociology, he's always criticising me. He thinks I'm useless.'
Friend: 'That's tough, when someone takes against you.'

Part-time lecturer: 'I was hoping to get some extra work this term, but no such luck. Still, I suppose I should be grateful anyway.'

What is interesting about all these exchanges is that the speakers almost certainly do not mean what they are literally saying. What they are saying is not true, and the people who respond to them as though it is, have been fooled.

What they could choose to do, instead of simply accepting these confused statements, is to use their skills to get to the real meaning.

We can take Ian's moan to Lien about the printer as an example. If Lien wanted to recover the real meaning behind Ian's statement, she could firstly reject the parts that are clearly untrue. The printer does sometimes do some things for some people. He even sometimes does things for Ian. What we need to know is what specifically he has not done, and Lien does not help us find out. Indeed she herself now makes a generalisation that is probably untrue. Has she never had any problems with him? Ian's next response goes into woolly ambiguity. The phrase 'generally unhelpful' really means nothing useful to anyone else.

If Lien had wanted to recover the real meaning she could have responded initially by 'What specifically has he not done?' followed by 'What things can you do to change that?' We are straight away into a very different and much more useful conversation.

Even if she had only challenged him after his second statement, she could still have recovered the meaning by responding: 'Tell me when he did something helpful'.

Of course, in theory Ian could have responded to Lien's first original statement by the following challenge. 'Tell me of a time when you did have a problem,' and Lien after thought will either modify her statement or confirm

that this is a very unusual relationship in which there have never been any problems.

All of this may seem absurdly petty, and certainly we do constantly make judgements about whether the conversation we are having is trivial, so it does not matter if we exaggerate, generalise, and are generally less than truthful, or whether we do actually need to be accurate and understand what is really being said.

Let us take another example that invites challenge.

Muriel makes two untrue statements about herself. No one ever in all the time she has been in the office has ever taken any notice of her? The absurdity of that is quickly exposed by the response, 'Tell me an occasion when someone did take notice of you'. Clearly Muriel is trying to make some statement that is important to her, but we do not really yet know what it is.

She then goes on to link together, as though the connection were true, the two statements as cause and effect. She needs to rethink this, and a useful response by a friend might be, 'What is it about being part-time that makes you think people therefore don't take notice of you? Why else might they behave like that?'

A similarly faulty connection between two statements is made by the student, who assumes that if a teacher criticises him a lot, it must be because he thinks he is useless. There are clearly a number of other possible reasons, one of which is that his work is so promising it is worth spending time on. He needs someone to challenge his illogical thinking.

What is noticeable in both of these examples is that the choice of language has disempowered Ian and Muriel. They have put themselves into a place where they are stuck, and skilled interventions will help them recover the power to do something about it.

A good example of disempowerment are all those examples in which someone says 'I can't', when they mean 'I choose not to'. One of the above examples illustrates this in a very common form. The secretary felt she was being badly treated by her boss, but had made the decision it was impossible to say anything to her about it. It may well in fact have been difficult, but it is not impossible, and her friend could have released her from her impasse by a response such as, 'What do you think would happen if you did tell her?'

## A MODEL FOR LINGUISTIC CHALLENGE

It is the work of Richard Bandler and John Grinder in developing their discipline of neuro-linguistic programming that has particularly highlighted the use of language as an imprisoning or a liberating mechanism. They describe, in what they call the meta model, the ways in which we can get hold of the real meaning of a person's communication by challenging in three areas:

1. deletions, where key information is missing;
2. distortions, where statements make connections or assumptions that contradict reality;
3. generalisations and 'have to' statements, where there is an implication of compulsion or inevitability, and options are reduced or eliminated.

Bandler and Grinder's meta model has 13 parts but they can be reduced to the following:

## 1. Deletions

Example: 'I am entitled to more responsibility.' This is a nominalisation. Without further explanation, 'responsibility' does not really mean anything.

Example: 'I am feeling very frustrated.' The verbal phrase is incomplete – frustrated about what?

Example: 'She humiliates me.' This is a generalised verb which lacks focus.

## 2. Wrong connections and distortions in thinking

Example: 'He is always criticising me. He does not think I am any good.' In this, one statement is illogically assumed to be the same as the other.

Example: 'I can tell the principal doesn't like me.' In this, the speaker is mind-reading.

Example: 'We cannot have a counsellor here – we are all professionals, after all.' In this there is an illogical presupposition that the second statement rules out the first.

## 3. Statements of compulsion or inevitability

Example: 'The head of department never takes any notice of me.' This implies universality.

Example: 'I have to be there if the students are there.' This implies lack of choice.

Example: 'I can't tell the principal that.' This implies impossibility.

You might at this point wish to practice the kinds of response that best confront the above nine statements. At the end of the chapter are some suggested responses to check against your answers.

It is of course necessary to challenge lack of clarity in someone else's statements with all the skills we have outlined in previous chapters. In particular, it will sound confrontational if you have not already established good rapport.

It is also important to use common sense as to when and how often you should challenge statements. There is no point in taking on every violation of the meta model. It requires judgement. The purpose is not to be critical of another person's linguistic capacity, nor to establish yourself in a superior

position. The sole purpose is to help you and sometimes the other person to understand the meaning of what he or she said.

So you might consider the following extract, note all the points at which one could challenge to make clear the meaning, and then decide in fact what challenge(s) you would probably make. It is taken from an appraisal interview.

'I'm really upset. I've always wanted more responsibility, but I've been forced into the position of turning this offer down. I should be grateful for the chance, but I can't take chances with my security. In any case I can't really trust her. She always puts me down – she doesn't really think I'm up to it. She really wanted someone else in her team not me. I'm an idealist, and all she is interested in is the money. We are just poles apart.'

## Summary

In this chapter we have indicated the importance of using language well to support other inter-personal skills.

In particular, we have stressed the importance of:

1. using words in such a way that we accept personal responsibility for what we say;
2. using words that accept our behaviour is our choice and not caused by someone else;
3. using challenges to recover the meaning when we hear statements that exhibit distortions, deletions or option limitation.

## Suggested responses to examples on page 53

Example: I am entitled to more responsibility.
Suggestion: What specifically do you want to be responsible for?

Example: I am feeling very frustrated.
Suggestion: What are you specifically frustrated about?

Example: She humiliates me.
Suggestion: What does she actually do?

Example: He is always criticising me. He does not think I am any good.
Suggestion: What else might his criticism of you mean?

Example: I can tell the principal doesn't like me.
Suggestion: What does she do that makes you think that?

Example: We cannot have a counsellor here – we are all professionals after all.
Suggestion: I don't understand. How does being a professional rule out having a counsellor?

Example: The head of department never takes any notice of me.
Suggestion: Never? Tell me a time when he did.

Example: I have to be there if the students are there.
Suggestion: What would happen if you weren't?

Example: I cannot tell the principal that.
Suggestion: Cannot? What do you think would happen if you did?

# CHAPTER 6

# COPING WITH CRITICISM

Deirdre Lacey, Christine's secretary, was feeling cheerful when she arrived and sat down at her desk on Monday morning. She had spent the weekend visiting friends with her partner and they had both enjoyed the break. She liked her job and felt that she was making good progress, so when Christine walked into her office, she was taken by surprise by what followed.

Christine: 'I hope you had a good weekend, Deirdre. Pity you left in such a hurry on Friday.'

Deirdre: 'How do you mean?'

Christine: 'Well, there were three letters that you should have had ready for me to sign to catch the Friday post, but you left so early they didn't get done.'

Deirdre thought back to Friday evening. She had left work at five – earlier than usual, but her hours for the week were quite within her agreed contract. She had felt a little guilty about leaving those letters though. She did not skip off early very often.

Deirdre: 'That's true, I did leave those letters.'

Christine: 'If you make a habit of it, it makes the department look inefficient.'

Deirdre: 'Yes, I can see that.'

Christine: 'If the letters had been really vital, I'd have had to get someone else to do them for you which wouldn't have been very fair on them.'

Deirdre: 'I wouldn't want anyone else to have to do extra work because of me. I'll make sure that doesn't happen in the future.'

Christine left satisfied that Deirdre really would avoid leaving letters untyped in future. Deirdre felt that Christine had a point and had quite fairly drawn attention to it. She could have handled the criticism less well if she had used denial, defence or attack.

*Denial*

Christine: 'I hope you had a good weekend, Deirdre. Pity you left in such a hurry on Friday.'

Deirdre: 'You can't accuse me of that. I worked my full hours last week. We're supposed to be on flexitime aren't we?'

*Defence*

Deirdre: 'Well, you see, I was going away for the weekend, and I had to go home in the Friday rush hour, change, then drive to Shaftesbury to get to my friend's house in time for dinner. It was an awful rush as it was.'

*Attack*

Deirdre: 'If you're referring to the letters I didn't manage to get typed, I'd easily have done them if you'd have asked me to type them a bit earlier in the day. You didn't give them to me until after lunch did you?'

All these three alternative responses would have led to a less productive outcome than the one Deirdre chose.

Deirdre shares an office with Jean Hole, another secretary. Towards the end of the morning, Jean suddenly and sharply addressed her. 'Whatever's the matter with you today Deirdre? You've been staring out of that window all morning.'

She is waiting for a response that will be in the form of a denial, a defence or a counter-attack. For example, Deirdre might have responded:

(*Denial*) 'No, I haven't. I've got loads of typing done this morning, and I spent at least an hour filing.'

(*Defence*) 'I've got a lot on my mind. I've got to sort it out. I'm not really back into work mode yet after the weekend, but I'm going to stay late at the office tonight, so there'll be plenty of time to get everything done this afternoon.'

(*Attack*) 'Okay, so what if I have. I haven't noticed you working all that hard today. You took ages for your coffee break, and your out-tray isn't exactly piled high, is it?'

Instead, Deirdre uses a technique known as negative enquiry.

Deirdre: 'Why does it bother you that I'm staring out of the window?'

Jean: 'You must have something more important to be getting on with.'

Deirdre: 'What is it you think I should be doing?'

Jean: 'I don't know what you've got lined up today, but I've certainly got masses of work and it's really boring – sending out a load of leaflets.'

Deirdre: 'Well, I do seem to have a bit of time to spare today. I'll give you a hand if you like.'

Selwyn Jones, a section head responsible for management courses, short courses and BTEC work, had prepared a paper for Helen Bassenthwaite, the principal, on courses his team were running on clients' premises. The document was confusing and not easy to read, because he had not prepared

it properly and was not naturally a fluent writer. It irritated Helen to have to spend a long time trying to discover the facts that should have been clearly laid out.

> 'Selwyn, this report. It's very confusing. I'm sorry to ask you to do more extra work, but would you mind having another go at it, and let me have it in time for the Friday meeting?'

Selwyn chose to accept the criticism as just, but without feeling upset about it. 'You're probably right', he said. 'I rushed it a bit and I'm not the world's best writer. I'll see what I can do to improve it.'

He could have become angry and defensive. For example: 'It seems clear enough to me. It certainly took long enough.'

This would not generally lead to any productive outcome. Of course if Selwyn genuinely felt that Helen's criticism was unjustified, and he had written a good paper, he could accept it as Helen's point of view, but without rancour maintain his own view: 'I do think that it is okay. That is why I let you have it. But if you found it hard to follow, I'll revise it for you.'

Ian, unusually for him, was feeling irritable, and he needed someone on whom he could off-load his irritation.

The industrial liaison officer, who was responsible to one of the assistant directors but shared an office with his secretary, was having a break and a smoke when he walked in. He had noticed her arrive late that morning clearly having done some shopping on the way in to work.

Ian: 'You were late in again this morning, Robin. You're getting very unreliable.'

Robin could have been irritated in her turn, but she was skilled at handling this kind of random criticism.

Robin: 'Yes, that's true. I was in late this morning.'

Ian: (more irritated by her calmness) 'This kind of thing will get you in trouble with your boss.'

Robin: 'You could be right. I might be in trouble.'

Ian: (beginning to flounder) 'If that happens and it looks as though you are behind with your work, you might well miss your upgrading.'

Robin: 'Yes, that makes sense. So if I think I'm getting behind, I'll make the time to catch up.'

Ian: (feeling he was on the losing end of this exchange all the time) 'You just don't seem to be taking this seriously. Don't you care about your job?'

Robin: 'I expect I seem that way to you sometimes.'

Ian gave up. He was feeling worse and she seemed to be feeling better, which wasn't what he had expected at all.

## COMMENTARY

We all face at times the stings and arrows from the armoury of our associates. Sometimes these can form a substantial part of the relationship between two people who work closely together. The comments are designed to hurt and put down the other person, and can vary from a slight barb to the thrust that cuts to the quick. It is easy after the event to say that the attack was childish and inaccurate and we should not take any notice of it. At the time, however, it is remarkably difficult to avoid being hooked into negative feelings and responding aggressively or defensively. We may strike back at the person, we may try to justify or excuse ourselves, we may sulk or even burst into tears. It is not in the reflective and considered analysis of what happened subsequent to the event that we need some helpful techniques. It is at the moment that the prejudicial comments are made. We are at that moment very vulnerable. We are experiencing rejection for, ipso facto, prejudicial statements are that to us. We are probably being labelled – as useless, inconsiderate, lazy. We may well be worrying that we are being over-sensitive to the comments of others. In the face of this vulnerability, it is well to recall the first and prime of our assertive rights: *I have the right to be the ultimate judge of myself*. It is worth holding on to the belief that other people's approval, while pleasant, is not essential to our happiness and wellbeing. Such a belief, however, tends to be elusive when most needed, and we need techniques to help us cope while it is recovered.

A key technique is *fogging*, and this was used by Robin very effectively. The basis of fogging is to avoid the three commonplace responses:

1. do not deny any criticism;
2. do not defend yourself;
3. do not counter-attack with criticism of the other person.

Fogging is a way of de-activating criticism by giving it no surface against which to strike. You cannot hit a fog bank with a stone. There are four ways of doing this, each of which Robin used.

In her first response Robin agreed with any factual truth in the statement made: 'Yes, I was late.'

She followed that up in her second response with agreeing with any possible truths in what Ian said as possibilities: 'Yes, I might be in trouble.'

Third, she agreed with any general truths in any logical statements made to her: 'Yes, if I got behind with my work, I might not be upgraded.'

Finally, she acknowledged any perception or opinions from Ian without accepting their truth. After all, he has a right to his opinion: 'Yes, you might look at it in that way.'

The value of fogging is that in the end, and sooner rather than later, the critic will give up because he is getting back no solid material on which to continue his attack. There is no denial, no self-justification, no counter-attack

You can't fight fog

– nothing but insubstantial fog. Although on the first few occasions the person using this technique may feel some dissatisfaction in that there seems to be no constructive outcome, the effect is cumulative. When anyone's attempted manipulation of another person is met by an assertive rather than an aggressive or defensive response, then interactions and exchanges begin to get cleaned up. No one enjoys being fogged, and there is strong incentive to reduce the number of put-down comments. This technique is really only appropriate when dealing with someone who is manipulative or is invading or attacking things about another person which are no business of theirs.

Deirdre used another technique called *negative enquiry* in her encounter with Jean Hole. Negative enquiry involves breaking the cycle of manipulation by asking for more information about the behaviour at issue, and this is what Deirdre did.

The key points about that dialogue are:

1. Deirdre behaved as if the criticism was not something to get upset about;
2. she stuck to negative enquiry throughout;

3. this established whether there was any substance in Jean's initial criticism or whether it masked another issue;
4. in this case it was not Deirdre staring out of the window, but her own overload that had upset her. Of course, the straight way for her to have dealt with it from the start would have been for Jean to say: 'Deirdre, I've got a lot of boring work to get through, and you don't look as though you're busy. Can you give me a hand?'

This is a fundamental issue. There is no reason why Jean should not feel annoyed that she has a pile of work and Deirdre has not. She does not have to justify that feeling to anyone. But if she wants a change, and that involves other people, then she has got to state how she feels and discuss the possibilities of some change from the other person. It will not do to attack Deirdre for some quite unconnected behaviour. It is not legitimate to use her annoyance to attack Deirdre's right to look out of the window or do anything else she wants to do. It is manipulative and will not help her. Honesty with how she is feeling probably will.

Christine's criticism of Deirdre and Helen's of Selwyn come into another category. The criticism is more or less justified or informed. Christine genuinely believed Deirdre's actions had created a problem; Helen genuinely believed that Selwyn's report was of poor quality. The comments are meant to be constructive. That is the intention even if in the event they are clumsily expressed or sound sharp or abrupt.

The key technique used by Selwyn and Deirdre is to accept that part which is or may be true without feeling guilt or the need to explain or justify. It is certainly not easy always to do that, but it is important to hold on to the basic right that you can make mistakes without feeling guilty. It does not mean, however, that criticism should be treated lightly. You are also responsible for your own actions. For example, to take another case:

Helen: 'Christine, you made a real pig's ear of that industrial presentation. I don't know what the effects are going to be.'

Christine: 'You're right. I fouled it up. I will have to think how to retrieve the situation.'

Helen: 'Good. Keep me informed.'

Sometimes the criticiser cannot leave the matter alone and is thrown by the lack of guilt response. If your assertive acceptance of your error is not heard and honoured after several statements, it may be necessary to reinforce it with fogging or negative enquiry. The basic message here, however, is that criticism is accepted for what it is – an accurate statement about a shortcoming – and that is all it is accepted for. There is no acceptance of guilt or of any wash-over effects from the actual action criticised to the rest of your personality or behaviour.

## Summary

1. When facing unreasonable criticism, key techniques are fogging and negative enquiry.
2. When facing constructive criticism, then the recipient should recognise the other person's right to give criticism.
3. The recipient should respond assertively; i.e. neither aggressively, defensively nor emotionally.
3. Accept criticism that is valid.
4. Do not accept criticism that you see as invalid but acknowledge that it is the opinion of the other person.
5. Assert a contrary statement when that is needed.

# CHAPTER 7

# EXPLORING PERSONAL ISSUES

## IAN'S DIALOGUE

Gavin Pomroy is 45, teaches accounts, and has always been a good, solid lecturer. While his teaching does not set the world on fire, it is thorough and his students get consistently good results. However, over the last six months or so, his interest seems to have waned and his A level students have noticed that his lessons are sometimes ill-prepared, he does not mark their work promptly, and he is occasionally late for his classes – all faults he has never shown before. Gavin does not know what is happening to him, and is worried that his work is simply not up to par, so he makes an appointment with Ian to ask for help. Ian knows that Gavin is a good teacher and is keen to help him recover. At the back of his mind, Gavin fears redundancy as the squeeze is put on college budgets.

On his arrival, Ian invites Gavin to sit down and offers him coffee which he accepts.

Ian: 'What can I do for you?'

Gavin: 'I've been feeling really bad. I feel that I'm failing my students. I know my classes are not up to scratch – I've always tried so hard for the students but, you know, at the moment I feel I'm really letting them down.'

Ian: 'What makes you think that, Gavin?'

Gavin: 'Well, you can tell when your lectures haven't gone well – and mine haven't. No question about it. It never used to happen.'

Ian: 'Are you overworked?'

Gavin: 'Nothing I couldn't normally handle. I just don't know why I can't cope with my usual workload.'

Ian: 'The syllabus has changed, hasn't it?'

Gavin: 'Yes that's true, but I'm an experienced teacher for heaven's sake. I ought to be able to take that on board oughtn't I?'

Gavin started fiddling with an elastic band, rolling it over and over in his fingers.

Ian: 'Is there any other reason you can think of – domestic problems, for example?'

Gavin heaved a sigh, then started to talk more quickly.

Gavin: 'Yes. You know, I suppose, that my wife's not been at all well. We know it's nothing serious now, but there was a time we both suspected cancer. She's on the mend, but it's been a great strain, the worry. And she gets very tired. She can't do much around the house. She gets very frustrated.'

Ian: 'Well, at least you know it's not the worst now. You can stop worrying. That must be a great relief. Perhaps things will be better from now on and you can pick up your old rhythm of work.'

Ian had been becoming increasingly uncomfortable as he said this, for Gavin was blowing his nose hard and had gone very red in the face. He looked as though he was struggling to fend off tears, and Ian knew he would find that hard to cope with. He hoped he could jolly Gavin along and get him out of the office before he really started to cry. He just couldn't handle emotional outbursts, particularly from men.

Gavin really wanted to go on. It was the first time he had felt able to talk about his home problems with anyone. He would have told Ian that his daughter was the main worry now. She had abandoned her university course after a traumatic love affair ended and she had moved into a squat. Gavin suspected she was spending a lot of time at raves and was taking ecstasy. He needed some real counselling. Ian, however, was giving him a lot of signals that he did not really want to listen any more. So instead of telling him of this greater problem, Gavin picked up the message that the interview was really over and replied , 'Yes, well, better look on the bright side of things, I suppose. I'm sure I'll find things easier to cope with from now on.'

## CHRISTINE'S DIALOGUE

Christine had an interview with one of her staff who had been working in the department for four years and felt she was due for promotion. She could have applied to other colleges, but really enjoyed the set-up in the department and the college was conveniently near her home. Christine had been busy with paperwork all morning and had not found time to warn her secretary that she would be occupied and unavailable for a time.

Christine: 'Hello Fay, come in and sit down. What is it you have come about?'

Fay: 'Well, I've been in the department four years and I believe my work is well regarded. I feel I'm due for promotion, but as people leave they are not being replaced, and when they are, the jobs are always temporary contracts. If I stay ...'

She breaks off as someone comes into the room to speak to Christine. Christine deals with the interruption and then turns back to Fay.

Christine: 'Sorry about that. Do go on.'

Fay: 'I was saying that I feel I need promotion.'

Christine: 'So you're really ambitious, Fay. You want to get to the top. Well, I think ambition is a jolly useful attribute. But if I were you I'd hang on for another couple of years. It's better the devil you know than the devil you don't. If you had my experience you'd see it was a mistake to keep moving on.'

Fay: 'I did see an interesting job advertised in another college. I feel I'd like to stay here but if I've no prospects maybe I ought to apply. The salary is no higher, though, and it's less ...'

She broke off as the phone rang. Christine asked the caller to telephone later.

To Fay's surprise, Christine abruptly drew the discussion to a close.

Christine: 'My view is, in the current climate, you might just as well stay here. Of course, even if you are thinking of moving on, I shan't take it into account in your appraisal interview next month.'

## MIKE'S DIALOGUE

Mike Watling, a senior lecturer in catering, is helping with the induction of a new psychology lecturer. They are in the staff room. The new lecturer, Sally Lister, just wants to have a quiet time and reflect on how her lesson went with the pre-nursing class.

Mike: 'How did your lesson go, Sally?'

Sally: 'Not too badly thank you.'

Mike: 'Did you feel nervous? I remember my first lecture. God, I'll never forget it. My knees were literally shaking. We all know what it feels like. How did the students react?'

Sally: 'They were pretty quiet.'

Mike: 'You're lucky then. That lot can talk all the way through if they are bored – which is most of the time. Did anyone walk out?'

Sally: 'No.'

Mike: 'Nothing worse than when they do that. It's quite a shock to the old ego. Mind you, I don't want them too quiet. I've had a few falling asleep in my time. To say nothing of the girls who bring in their crochet. Back in the 60s they all used to sit there making black lacy shawls. Still, I don't suppose you remember those days. You were still in your cradle. You are feeling quite happy then about your first week?'

Sally: 'Yes. Fine, thanks.'

Mike: 'You're probably having a hard time just finding your way around and knowing who's who. Still, I'm always here to point you in the right direction.'

These are of course very abbreviated exchanges, but enough happens in them to illustrate some of the common failures in trying to help another person.

There are levels of increasing incompetence, and the ultimate level must be the failure to allow the other person even to state what he or she has come in to say. All three interviewers fail at this basic level to some degree. Gavin never reaches the real problem that is worrying him. Fay had half got into the point she was making, but after an interruption she never had the opportunity to complete it. Sally said exactly what she wanted to say, but her interviewer never heard it. There are other failures we can note in the response of Ian, Christine and Mike, but the fundamental one was that they never got the message.

## Comments on Ian's dialogue

If we look in more detail at Ian's interview with Gavin, we can note a number of failings that are all too common in such situations. Given the symptoms that Gavin describes, Ian feels compelled to search for a reason, so he goes on a probing journey, trying out this possibility and that, until he hits lucky, and gets a response. This is a pretty inappropriate technique, and can commonly lead to frustration in the interviewer as he achieves no response and runs out of probes, and in the interviewee as he is distracted from his real concern by irrelevant questions. The main problem is that Ian has already taken over the responsibility of finding an answer, and in so doing has virtually closed down Gavin's option of using the occasion to explore his problem. Ian's compulsion to locate a cause quickly is related to his belief that it is his job in such circumstances to come up with a solution, a fix to the problem. A technique which would have achieved a much better outcome would have been for Ian to encourage Gavin to talk more about the symptoms.

Gavin: 'Well, you can tell when your lectures haven't gone well ... it never used to happen.'

Ian: 'Tell me more about what has been happening.'

Gavin then can go into some detail about his problem. Ian can intervene with similar questions whenever Gavin seems to be drying up or going round in circles – for example, Ian could say: 'So tell me what has been happening to you that's different this year.'

At some point, Gavin will reach the real reason he has sought this interview. He has presented the symptoms – his poor work with students. He has given the presenting problem – his wife's illness which is now more or less over. He can then go on to the real issue – his worry about his daughter. In fact Ian never lets him get that far, and only ever hears of the presenting problem. The particular reason in this case is that he cannot deal with other

people's overt distress, particularly with crying. He moves in quickly to prevent Gavin getting deeper into an emotional state by keeping his responses very superficial and platitudinous. Underneath his platitudes is a desperate plea to Gavin to get control of himself and go away. Gavin picks up the message, regains his composure, and leaves without any help for the very deep-felt problem he has.

In fact if Ian had responded encouragingly after Gavin's account of his wife's illness, saying little but giving clear signals he was ready to listen attentively and empathetically, then he would have given permission to Gavin to continue. It might well be that Ian would then quickly realise he was not competent to handle such a situation himself, and could have referred Gavin to the college counsellor who was trained to help people in distress. That is what Gavin was seeking, and Ian's lack of skill combined with his own fear meant that Gavin did not get it.

To summarise the lessons Ian could learn from this encounter:

- do not use probing questions randomly;
- do not prevent people expressing emotional distress;
- do not use platitudes to keep the interview safe;
- do not mistake the presenting problem for the real problem;
- do refer people to trained and skilled counsellors if getting in over your head.

## Comments on Christine's dialogue

Christine is a very hard-working and efficient manager, but in this dialogue she makes nearly every mistake in the book. The most disastrous one is very obvious. She allowed the meeting to be interrupted by people coming into the office and by telephone calls. She discounted Fay and her importance very thoroughly by doing this. To Fay this was an important occasion. It was about her future. Yet Christine could not even give her undivided time.

Apart from the discount, it also made it difficult for Fay to make the points she wanted. Two of her points were completely lost. We do not know, and Christine certainly did not know, what she was going to say.

Christine was nevertheless prepared to respond positively. The nature of those responses, however, reveals another trap for those helping others. First, she happily interprets what Fay was saying in a way she has no way of knowing is accurate. Fay has said she wants promotion. Christine decides that therefore she is ambitious and wants to get to the top. This may or may not be true. Christine has no way of knowing. Most likely, however, it is a projection of her own driving force onto Fay.

Second, Christine assumes that Fay wants her advice, and she is very willing to give it – 'If I were you, I'd hang on for another couple of years.' The point is that she isn't Fay, and as she isn't her advice is about herself, not about

Fay. She gives more advice – 'My view is you might just as well stay here'. What she hasn't explored is what Fay's view is. Oddly, we know more about Christine's reaction to the issue than Fay's at the end of the interview.

Third, Christine – maybe unconsciously but with no less effect – emphasises the hierarchic relationship of their roles. 'If you had my experience ...', and, 'I shan't take it into account at your appraisal interview', are not only irrelevant to the kind of discussion they are having; they are positively harmful. It is very difficult for a staff member to explore important issues about herself and her future if hierarchic roles are emphasised by her boss.

Fourth, Christine did not make any attempt to listen, to give time and space for one of her staff to talk. It was all quick-fire response, advice, solution. It was no doubt part of Christine's style that reinforced her self-image as a whizz kid manager. It was totally dysfunctional to handling well the managerial task she actually had before her.

To summarise the lessons Christine might have learnt from her encounter:

- do not allow interruptions;
- do not make an interpretation of what another person is saying, and state it to him/her as truth;
- do not emphasise unnecessarily status differences;
- do not treat such encounters as practice grounds for rapid-fire management – instead give space and time to the interviewee.

## Comments on Mike's dialogue

Mike fails at every count – he establishes no rapport, he does not listen to what Sally says, he takes over the exchange to satisfy needs of his own. Though his behaviour is crass by any standards, the traps he is falling into are quite common in less blatant form.

The first trap is assuming before the interview that there is a problem, and any denial of this is just a refusal to face up to it. Mike, having made his initial assumption, was unwilling to let it go. Whatever Sally said, he was determined she had to have a problem.

Second, he was anxious to create common ground between them by identifying common experiences. This very seldom works. Most often the interviewee experiences it as the interviewer taking over and thus displacing her story with his. Over-identifying with the other person can seem competitive – anything you have experienced I've experienced worse, more often, etc.

Third, as a result of over-identifying, in this case a phantom identification since Sally actually didn't share it, it is common to project onto the exchange one's own values, experiences, and fears. At the superficial level this leads to pointless anecdotes about 60s women students crocheting shawls. At the more intense level, the manager attributes to other people his own fears of incompetence and lack of order in classrooms.

Fourth, Mike may well have been one of the compulsive talkers who can neither tolerate silences nor very short exchanges.

So Mike, in the unlikely event he learnt anything by reflecting on his performance, might have learnt the following:

- do not assume beforehand that someone has a problem;
- do not assume you know the nature of that problem;
- do not assume the nature of that problem is the same as your personal problem experiences;
- do not inappropriately identify with someone's problem by describing fairly similar experiences you have had;
- do not feel the need to fill every silence, and expand on every short response.

## COMMENTARY AND DISCUSSION ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE DIALOGUE

In this section we will look at the objectives of the interview; the overall strategy of the interview; the preconditions of a successful interview; and the setting for the interview.

### The objectives

The kind of interaction we are considering in this chapter is that when a manager is dealing with some issue concerning a member of staff which is not simply a technical or organisational matter but appears to require an exploration of more personal concerns. Very often it will start by the staff member asking for help or advice, or simply wanting to talk things over. Dialogues of this type commonly go wrong because of a misapprehension of their objective. The purpose will presumably be to reach a point where the interviewee finds a solution which she sees as her solution to the problem and which she is committed to implementing. Any solution which is imposed, which is not fully accepted and owned by the interviewee, and which is really the solution of the manager is unlikely to achieve any useful change in behaviour or attitude.

It is the inability to keep this distinction clear which makes so many encounters fruitless. Most managers have been trained or have come to accept that in the last resort, and sometimes well before that, it is their decision that has to stand. While there may be areas in their managerial work where this is a sensible point of view, it is totally unproductive in this context. The managerial decision may on the surface be accepted, but unless it is internalised by the interviewee, then it is of no value. If a staff member does not really accept a decision, he or she has a hundred ways of preventing it being operated without an open defiance of the management.

## The overall strategy

If we agree that the objective is to find a solution acceptable to the interviewee, then the overall strategy of the interview must be to help her define her own problem and find a practical course of action to which she is committed, and to create the conditions in which this exploration and solution can happen.

It follows that the very last thing a manager should be giving is advice. That is something Christine does not understand. Advice is totally counter-productive to effective counselling. Advice is a statement of what the solution is for the manager if the manager was in the problem situation. The objective, however, is not to find solutions for the manager, nor is it to exhibit the superior problem-solving capacity of the manager. Advice is at the best irrelevant to the objective, at worst it is the exercise of management power.

We face, however, a considerable problem in implementing this strategy. Teachers often find it very difficult not to give advice and exhortation. This, after all, is their training; it has been part of their daily business of being a teacher since they first qualified. However much they may wish to switch their mode of operating to non-directive facilitating, in practice it generally proves too difficult without some formal training.

## Preconditions

Encounters of this nature are only likely to have a successful outcome if certain preconditions are satisfied.

The first and most important of these is the existence of trust between the two people involved. Both must feel confident that the other person will not on another occasion take advantage of attitudes, opinions and facts revealed during the interview. Both must therefore believe that each means well towards the other. It is not necessary that the relationship be one of great friendship. It can be entirely neutral in the affective sense, but it must have this level of basic trust. Normally any interview would be bound by the rules of confidentiality on both parties, and both need to have confidence that this is observed in the event as well as in intention.

The corollary of the need for trust is that the two people involved must be relatively open with each other. The outcome will only be successful if openness is seen to be practised by both. One of the commoner causes of abortive encounters is the unwillingness of the interviewee to reveal many of the essential facts of his situation, and the failure of the manager to encourage or respond to openness. Both are secretive, protective of themselves, disclosing only those parts of themselves which seem safe. This generally arises due to a lack of trust, a suspicion of the other person at least in this situation.

The third precondition is the recognition of the equal standing of the other person, a mutual respect of the work of each other and each other's ideas. We cannot ignore the existence of hierarchic ranks or functions but, within the overall acceptance of this, it is important for the manager to recognise the rights of the person he is talking to, and particularly his right to be seen as equally intelligent, committed and perceptive. If the unspoken (and possibly subconscious) assumption is that the manager is somehow better endowed with these attributes, then failure is inevitable because it is in effect a reinforcement of the power of the manager to be seen as the superior person.

The fourth precondition is that there should be acceptance by both that they may have to change their attitudes or behaviour. The mutual acceptance of change means that the manager cannot work on the principle that all changes are going to have to be made by the interviewee. Inevitably any period of fruitful interpersonal relationship will be dynamic and reactive and lead to changes and adjustments by both parties, but this process is not always recognised by the manager, who may be very resistant to change in himself or herself while encouraging a great amount of change in the other person. On occasions it may be that after discussion of a problem it is the manager who needs to make changes and the interviewee remains as he or she is.

The fifth precondition is that the manager should not bring into the meeting any strong feelings of anger, hostility or the like. Very strong negative emotional reactions will make any constructive work towards a solution very difficult. Such a situation most commonly arises in disciplinary interviews, but can be sparked off at any time, if something touches the vulnerable parts of an individual's psyche, and we all have such parts we have carried with us from childhood.

In the case studies at the beginning of this chapter, Christine did not work to these preconditions, failing at least on the third and fourth; Ian failed on the second and fifth; and Mike did not get beyond failing at the first.

## The setting

We only have to recall the rooms of a number of our colleagues at work to observe how different they are in appearance. If we have a room of our own we arrange it to reflect an image of ourselves, an image presumably reflecting how we want to be seen publicly in our function as the holder of a particular post. There are no rules about how we should or should not arrange our rooms. Some may like a room with a clear desk and a tidy appearance, others prefer to have one with work in various stages scattered on every available surface. Some like to fill walls with charts and diagrams, others like blank walls, still others like their personal choice of pictures or posters. Some have nothing in their office that does not reflect their job, others let all sorts of interests from their private life intrude such as family photographs, golf

clubs, etc. Some spend care in arranging their rooms with aesthetic sensitivity and do not have an ugly object or discordant colour in sight; others pay no attention to aesthetic appearance at all.

In one sense none of this matters: it is entirely up to room occupants to express themselves as they think fit. But in a meeting it is going to make some difference.

From the perspective of the staff member coming into the room to discuss some sensitive matter, the clues he or she picks up from the appearance of the room are part of the communication process. We are all aware that different rooms have different feelings or atmospheres – some seem calm or relaxing, others impersonal, cold, hostile, messy, efficient, etc. If staff members react badly to the atmosphere of a room, they may interpret the clues they have picked up as statements about the manager's general attitude. We cannot argue that managers should arrange their rooms solely to get maximum benefit from staff interviews; after all they use their room for other purposes as well. The manager might, however, give some thought to the likely effects on the people who enter the room and consider making some changes in its appearance.

Some changes are very easy because they are concerned with non-permanent phenomena. The two most obvious are the positioning of chairs,

and the dress of the manager. In most rooms the occupant has a number of choices where the two chairs are placed for a meeting. He or she might take the traditional manager's position behind the desk with the other chair in front of it; or might sit behind the desk but turn sideways to a chair brought in at the side of the desk. He or she might have a larger chair than the visitor, a more comfortable or a higher chair.

Whatever decision the manager makes, we would suggest it is done with some consideration of the likely effect. Generally that decision will be based on the degree of closeness or distance he wishes to establish and the degree of dominance or equality he wishes to work in.

Similarly, the way in which the manager dresses gives clues about distance and formality, and there is little doubt that people respond differently and subjectively to the way people dress. We are not suggesting of course that managers try to dress to suit the interviewee, or have one set of clothes for a discipline interview and another for a personal interview. They should however be aware of the possible effects of all parts of the setting of a meeting and that must include their dress. If a manager is failing to generate the relaxed atmosphere or degree of warmth and empathy she is aiming at, then it is worth considering , among other things, the effect of her own appearance.

## Basic style of interventions

During the encounter, managers will need to have at their disposal all the skills and more that are described in this book, in the process of helping the interviewee identify and clearly define the problem, facilitate the exploration of options and change-decisions, and help to deal with emotions and feelings in an open and healthy way.

Each person will have their own individual style, and as we noted in the dialogues in Chapter 6 between Christine and Deirdre, and Selwyn and Helen, this may express itself particularly in the mode of intervention.

The categorisation of responses we have used is:

- the non-committal or reflective;
- the interpretative;
- the probing;
- the supportive;
- the evaluative.

Supposing a staff member, in discussing his future, said: 'I thought I'd better tell you – I have had this offer of a good job back in my old firm. I thought a lot about it, but I've decided I would rather stay and make my future in the college. So I will be working hard for promotion in the department.'

If we suppose that the staff member is, in the considered view of his manager, not a particularly strong prospect for promotion – in fact is about adequate in his present job – how might she respond?

The supportive response might be: 'Good. I'm glad you've made up your mind where you want to go. I'll be all the help I can in your career, though the promotion race is tough nowadays. If you run across any difficulties you want to talk out, I'm always here and if you don't get the promotion you want, we'll find other ways to help.' (Whatever you decide, I'll make helpful noises.)

The evaluative response might be: 'I guess that if you weigh up the pros and cons I don't think you are doing the best thing for your future.' (I'll tell you whether you have got it right or wrong.)

The probing response might be: 'I wonder if you have thought through the policy of promotion in the college. Do you match up to the possibilities?' (You have got some thinking to do.)

The interpretative response might be: 'What you seem to have decided is to go for safety and the familiar work rather than the challenges and risks of an unpredictable future.' (I will tell you what you were thinking.)

The non-committal response might be: 'You seem to be saying that you see future promotion prospects best in this college.' (Tell me again what you are saying.)

There are times in any interview when we need elements of all five responses, but it is very likely that we will lapse into our favourite and habitual style, however inappropriate it is. Accepting that all styles are needed, there is a strong argument that the uncommitted response is of particular value. The act of feeding back to the interviewee what he appears to be saying has proved a very effective device to encourage him to analyse his situation.

Our typical response strategy may well be influenced by the extent of responsibility we normally take on ourselves for the interview and its outcome. If we normally do much more than half the share of work we are creating or reinforcing a dependency relationship. Christine would typically do that. If we do very much less than half the work, then we are not earning our money and abdicating managerial responsibility. If we work on a roughly equally shared responsibility between the two of us, then this is likely to encourage the most healthy relationship. This does not refer necessarily to the amount of time we each spend talking. It refers to all the activities, and the underlying joint concern for ensuring success.

The final point to make is that although we have referred several times to the interviewee's problem and the searching for a solution, there will be occasions where there is no apparent solution. The problem and situation may be unalterable, but the value of the interview is that the staff member's perception of his situation may be changed. To come to a realistic understanding of his situation may be the first step to moving from a distorted view to a tolerance of the situation and its accompanying pressures and stresses. So it would be a mistake to strain after a solution at all costs, or regard the exercise as a failure if a solution does not emerge.

# CHAPTER 8

## STAYING WITH REALITY

Four of the senior staff, Christine, Ian, Frankie and Victor, have been attending a meeting of the college development team, and are having a short coffee break in Frankie's office.

Frankie: 'What do you think was the matter with Helen this morning. She looked really uptight.'

Ian: 'Did she? I didn't notice anything.'

Frankie: 'Did you notice anything, Christine?'

Christine: 'Well, now you come to mention it, she was a bit tense – I didn't pay much attention to it at the time.'

Frankie: 'You were too busy arguing your own case. That's the trouble with you. But I feel really bad I did nothing about it. I ought to have asked her what was the matter, but I didn't know if it would make matters worse.'

Victor: 'Well, I should think it's man trouble. It generally is. I guess she and Damien have had another set-to.'

Frankie: 'I think I'll go back and see what's the matter – though if it is all about Damien, maybe she won't want us interfering in her private business. Perhaps I'll leave it till a better time.'

The four then dispersed to their various duties, but Frankie carried on worrying about Helen, and three days later bumped into her in the car park.

'Hello Helen,' said Frankie. 'I've been meaning to ask you – were you feeling all right at the meeting the other day? I mean ... I wondered if there was something the matter.'

As she spoke she could feel a part of her as though it was an outside observer critically listening to what she said to see if she was doing it well enough.

Helen assured her she was fine, that it was nothing of great concern, just some family arrangements she needed to sort out, and then talked brightly about another matter.

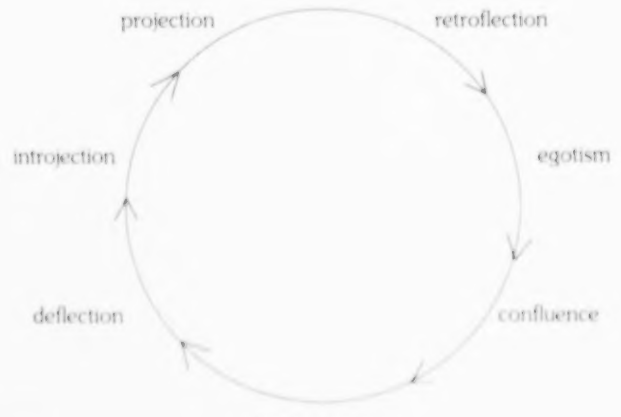
For several days, Frankie could not get out of her mind that something was wrong, and she ought to be doing something about it. It was only driven out of her head by a disaster that befell one of the staff in her section.

This dialogue demonstrates how difficult it sometimes is to keep contact with what is really happening around us. If we want to relate well to others, we need to avoid any breaks or barriers to our full contact with the situation as we can sense, see and hear it.

Animals have this full sense of awareness, total concentration on the world they are in. They need it for survival.

Humankind, however, has the pain and privilege of imagination - being able to create worlds that are totally detached from the world around, and in that process decommission sensory activity. We can day-dream, create fantasies, have imaginary conversations. This can be a beguiling and occasionally a useful activity, but when it comes to occupy much of our waking life, our contact with reality becomes very limited. Our thoughts are with things of the past or anticipations of the future. We are responding with patterns of behaviour from our own past history, the commands and injunctions absorbed from our parents, teachers and others. We are repeating our experiences of past relationships, calculating, preparing for, defending against what might happen this time round. Not surprisingly, in all this mental and emotional activity scanning forwards and backwards in our lives, it is common simply not to take in what is happening around us, what we are seeing and hearing in the precise place at this precise moment. At its more extreme, we may begin to move into a world of delusion or paranoia.

**Figure 5: Interruptions to contact**



A central concept for gestalt psychologists is that of 'the here and now'. This is a concern that the individual is able to experience fully and with discrimination the impact of the immediate environment via his or her senses. It can be described as the management of the boundary between self and environment. A commonly used phrase is the cycle of experience, and we can use it to illuminate the above conversation and in the process explain more fully the concept.

**Figure 5** illustrates the stages we may go through in blocking full awareness of our current environment.

## Stage one: desensitisation

Ian was demonstrating desensitisation. He was not sensing, i.e. using his sensors to pick up the stimuli in his environment. Any of us can at times just not see what is in front of our eyes or hear what is being said within earshot. We can train our bodies not to regard the cold temperature, the hunger pangs, the physical or emotional pain. We may not pick up the signs of someone else's distress.

## Stage two: deflection

Christine had picked up the signals but had treated them as of no importance. It was as though the stimuli came through the senses and then were deflected onwards without having any impact on the person's awareness of what was happening in the environment. They were just treated as part of the undifferentiated noise and scenery around.

We face all the time a mass of information that our senses are recording and we have to be selective about what we give attention to and bring into full awareness. For animals it is presumably anything that suggests danger, might provide food or shelter, or satisfy mating drives. We have many more distractions and it is easy to ignore some of the information even if it is potentially quite important to us. We may be preoccupied with our thoughts or other activities as Christine was, or we may be daydreaming, replaying things from the past, rehearsing scenes for the future, and we just do not attend to the evidence of our senses.

## Stage three: introjection

Frankie did pick up the signals via her senses, and she did take notice of and think about them. However, she did not do anything about it, either in the original meeting or in the subsequent conversation over coffee. She stopped herself by using an injunction, i.e. a statement to herself about what she ought or ought not to do. These messages in our heads generally originate from some past instructions from authority figures such as parents, teachers,

priests, etc., and are incorporated into the codes by which we handle our lives. Frankie frequently would not intervene in a situation when it was sensible to do so because she had been taught some way or other that her efforts could easily make things worse rather than better, and it was rude to distract people when they were concentrating on something by raising something else, particularly if it was personal. So typical introjects or messages in our heads might be:

- do not interfere in other people's business;
- it is best not to create a fuss;
- she probably won't thank me.

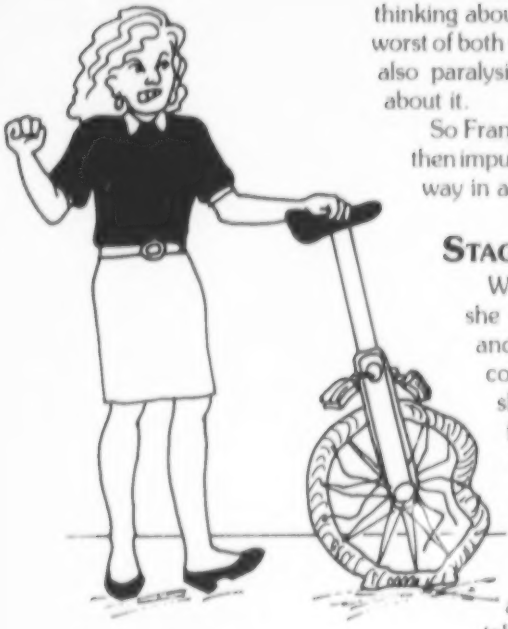
## Stage four: projection

At the point when it was appropriate to consider possible options open to them, Victor took them right away from that by offering an interpretation that was a projection of his own concerns and fears. He assumed that any moodiness in a woman was probably caused by emotional troubles with men. His own experience in his family and subsequently with his wife had led him to expect and fear that. His comment was not really about Helen and Damien at all, but about himself. It was effective enough, however, to divert the group away from assessing possible options against the reality of the situation. It is inevitable of course that we view events through our own subjective experience, and it would be unlikely that we could avoid at times using them to mirror our own preoccupations. It is a matter of degree. Victor had established a projection pattern that came into play almost automatically over a large area of human interaction, and that becomes a major break with living with reality.

## Stage five: retroflection

Frankie accepted the validity of Victor's projection and prepared herself to take some action on that basis. She then fell into the trap of retroflection. This is the procrastinator's delight. It is the way in which, at the very last minute, we prevent ourselves from taking the action when we are all geared up to do so. It is not that we don't intend to do it. We just put it off for another time. Those who retroflect a lot will put off making a phone call all evening or writing a letter for weeks, not because they don't want to but somehow or other they just cannot get round to doing it. As the energy to get up and take the action begins to flow, a counter-force seems to emerge, which stops us. We may use phrases to ourselves such as 'I'll do it in a minute'; 'I'll just wait a bit to see how it goes'.

Frankie, still with injunctions in her head about whether it was really all right to interfere if it was a private matter, decided to wait a bit for a more suitable time. But as generally happens, when we retroflect, we don't stop



Breaking contact ...

thinking about the situation, and are in the worst of both worlds by worrying about it yet also paralysing ourselves to do anything about it.

So Frankie worried for three days and then impulsively tackled Helen in a clumsy way in an inappropriate place.

## STAGE SIX: EGOTISM

When Frankie finally took action she should have felt the pleasure and satisfaction of doing and completing the task for which she had been building herself up for so long. It is a natural psychological process to feel a sense of release when we actually do the job. Frankie, however, denied herself that natural satisfaction by acting as a critic to herself as she talked to Helen and also in the immediate aftermath. She was judging herself, checking how she had done, and in particular trying to assess by being outside herself in the position of a neutral observer. In doing this, she was divorcing herself from full participation in the act. It is as though in the process of declaring undying love to our beloved we step outside ourselves to view how we are doing. This process is known as egotism.

## STAGE SEVEN: CONFLUENCE

After Frankie had spoken to Helen, the episode was over. However unsatisfactorily the group had handled it, things now would move on to other concerns. Frankie, however, could not let go of it. It stayed with her for several days, and she only got rid of it in the end when a greater crisis intervened. It is a characteristic of some people that they are very unwilling to let things go when they are really at an end. They hold onto friendships, keep connections with organisations they have left, write to holiday friends, keep meetings going, etc. The process of hanging onto things, of seeming to be fearful of closing episodes, both large and small, in their lives, we refer to as confluence – an inability to separate. It might emerge in phrases such as 'I only feel alive when I am with you', or 'My job is my whole life – I couldn't be without it'.

## HANDLING THE CYCLE OF EXPERIENCE

The cycle of experience takes us through the stages that we need in order to respond to what is in our environment and act in a way that leaves us satisfied and with a sense of completion:

- we sense what is around us;
- we bring it into awareness;
- we mobilise ourselves to take some kind of action;
- we decide on the options open to us;
- we take the chosen action;
- we experience a sense of satisfaction;
- we pause or rest before responding to the next experience.

This process may take only seconds or a few days, but to complete any cycle effectively we need to avoid any contact-breaker at any of the stages.

How might our four managers have acted if they had successfully followed the cycle? (**Figure 6.**)

Frankie notices that Helen is showing signs of distress (sensation), and is concerned enough to look more carefully (awareness).

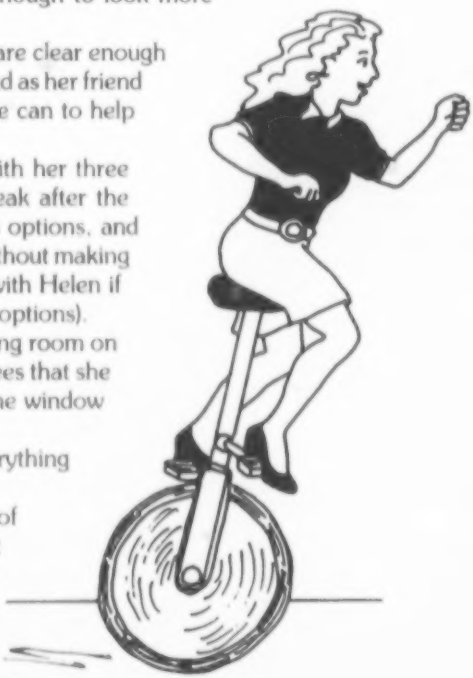
She realises that the signals are clear enough to suggest that Helen is upset, and as her friend she decides she will do what she can to help (mobilising).

She therefore discusses it with her three colleagues in a short coffee break after the meeting. They consider various options, and the consensus is that Frankie, without making a big issue out of it, will check with Helen if everything is okay (deciding on options).

Frankie walks past the meeting room on her way to Helen's office, and sees that she is still in the room standing at the window and looking out.

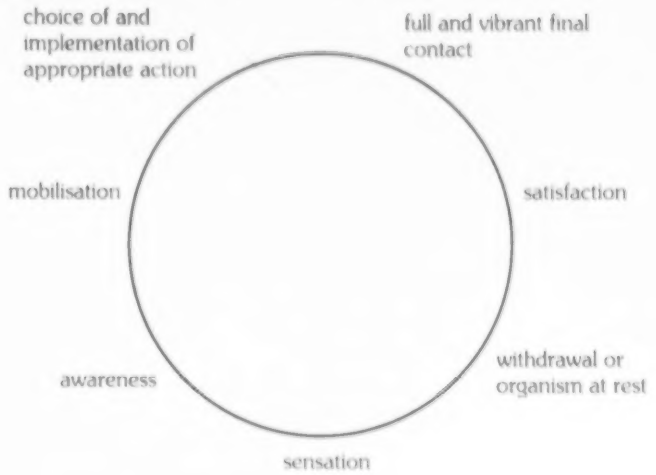
Frankie says gently, 'Is everything okay, Helen?' (action).

Helen replies, 'I've got a bit of worry about my mother. I don't think she can manage on her own much longer. We'll have to work something out, but I just feel sad she is getting like that. She's been such a tower of strength for me – well, for everybody really.'



...the contact cycle

**Figure 6: Cycle of experience or contact cycle**




The two talk for a bit, then Helen thanks Frankie for her concern, says she feels better and must get back to the office.

Frankie feels pleased she took the time to come back and find Helen. It turned out to be the right thing to have done (satisfaction).

She pauses a moment when she gets back to her office, takes a deep breath and clears her mind, before she sits down to deal with the next business (rest).

This incident demonstrates how we can clear issues by not avoiding actions, by not interposing our own concerns, and by not hanging on to unfinished business.

We can practice this technique on any item we face in our daily experience.

For example, being ignored by someone in the staffroom; needing to check some references for the article we are writing; preparing for a lesson; marking an assignment; thinking about our future in the college; seeing a job advertisement.

## When breaking the cycle is useful

In most cases, we will handle matters better if we keep to the stages of the cycle. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that there are never advantages in using contact-breakers. There are times when we need to use devices and strategies to distance ourselves from parts of the 'here and now', rather than allowing ourselves to experience maximum contact. Examples of appropriate reasons to break the cycle (and at what stage) are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| desensitisation | for survival |
| deflection | keeping to priorities |
| introjection | checking standards |
| projection | applying learning |
| retroflection | caution |
| egotism | objective monitoring |
| confluence | passion |

### Desensitisation

There are occasions where our well-being and indeed our very survival depends upon our capacity not to feel. In survival situations such as concentration camps or rescue expeditions, then the ability not to feel pain, hunger, fatigue is of high value. Equally, there are situations where to ignore emotional pain is essential for getting through each day.

### Deflection of awareness

When faced with the need to concentrate on one or a small number of important issues, it is useful to be able to deflect irrelevant information being given to us by our senses. For example, if we are counselling a person in distress, it is probably appropriate to keep any distress of our own outside our awareness. If we are concentrating on a very difficult piece of driving on a mountain road, it is safer to ignore the niggles and moans of our passengers.

### Introjection

There are times when, before we respond directly to an environmental stimulus, it may be appropriate to check out with our own rules and standards whether our proposed behaviour is correct. Introjects are a source of our behavioural rules. For example, we may believe it is better to choose sensitively our moment for criticising someone who is already in distress rather than telling them straight away at the first opportunity.

### Projection

Projections are derived from our own learning and experience. Used generally and without appropriateness, they impose on others interpretations

that derive from our own concerns. However, there may be occasions when the experience which we have can, with care, be transferred to another's situation. It can only ever be a provisional and never a certain diagnosis.

## Retroflection

Another word for this could be caution. There will be occasions when our intuition tells us to hold back from action. Sometimes we may not be sure why, other times we may see clear reasons for caution. For example, if on receiving a memo from our boss that annoys us, we first intend to charge straight in to have it out with him, it might be wise to stop as our hand grasps the door knob, and wonder whether a walk round the block might be a better initial response.

## Egotism

To reflect on our behaviour and actions so that we can monitor our performance and learn from our mistakes, even while we are performing, would seem a useful process. The skill is in not letting egotism get in the way of full participation. If we can both enjoy taking part, and also have a way of reflecting on the event, then we are likely to gain. However, all group trainers will have had experience of the member who thinks and analyses all the time, but will not get involved in group processes.

## Confluence

Those whom we love, objects of our passion, will be held dear to us, and we will want to hold them in our hearts. When confluence arises from passion, it is hard to say it is dysfunctional, even if, as passion generally does, it has high costs.

In the course of our daily living we will interrupt the cycle of awareness often enough. It may spoil our experience of living or it may be a sensible way of handling events at that moment. If we are aware of the prevalence of contact-breaking in normal human intercourse, then we can be on our guard, and be aware of patterns of interruption that may be impoverishing our lives.

## An exercise on breaking contact

We invite you to undertake any of the following exercises. In each case, get in touch with your feelings. Learn what you can about yourself. Decide how you want to change to create an improved experience for yourself.

1. Recall a time when you simply failed to notice what was happening.
2. Recall a time when you gave no attention to something or someone you saw, heard, felt.
3. Recall an injunction that stopped you doing something you were considering.

4. Recall a time when you attributed your own concerns, fears or other feelings to someone else to explain their behaviour or your response.
5. Recall a time when you stopped yourself doing something or asking for something at the very last moment.
6. Recall a time when, instead of really entering into something, your mind stayed outside, assessing/evaluating what you were seeing or doing.
7. Recall something you have not managed to let go yet.

# CHAPTER 9

# GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Christine was annoyed with Saffron Harrington, a lecturer in the school of art and design. Saffron was an illustrator and her work had impressed Christine. She thought that some illustrations from Saffron would liven up the college prospectus which she was revamping. She had spent a good two hours explaining to Saffron exactly what she wanted her to do, and Saffron had seemed pleased to be commissioned to do the work.

Saffron arrived with her portfolio of a dozen illustrations, and Christine saw straight away that the work was not what she had in mind at all.

'Look Saffron, we spent ages talking about what would be appropriate for the prospectus. You seem to have ignored all that. These drawings are attractive, but they aren't what I was after. I thought it was quite clear. We want something that grabs people's attention, but these are too brash. They won't attract the sort of people we are aiming at. You'll have to re-do them.'

Saffron bristled. She could see that perhaps she had got it wrong, but she had spent a long time on these drawings. If Christine was so worried about them, why had she not asked her to do one or two initially, and then discussed them with her. And she didn't even sound apologetic. After all, if the woman could not even make herself clear, how was she to know what she wanted? Saffron sensed that if she tried to argue in favour of the drawings she would not get anywhere with Christine. She felt like shouting at her, but controlled herself just enough to mutter, 'I'll see what I can do,' and stormed out of the office, thinking, 'what an awful woman. She didn't even thank me for all the time it took. Well, I'm certainly not going to spend ages on the new illustrations – she probably won't like those either.'

Selwyn Jones was the next person to enter Christine's office. He was feeling angry with her too. One of his lecturers, Janet Meeks, teaching on a travel and tourism BTEC course, had asked him to make an alteration in the accommodation arrangements of a group of students who were travelling to Spain to do some work experience for three weeks. Unlike their fellow students who were studying French and staying in a three star hotel in Bordeaux, the Spanish contingent were visiting an industrial town and staying in a youth hostel. Selwyn, concerned about the cost of upgrading the accommodation had said it was just hard luck, but Janet had mentioned the

problem informally to Christine who had promptly sanctioned upgrading the accommodation.

'Christine, I don't suppose you've got a moment? There is something I must discuss with you.'

'Fine, yes. Anything wrong?'

'Well, it's nothing really. I believe Janet Meeks came to you the other day and you gave her permission to upgrade the accommodation for her students when they visit Spain.'

'Why yes, I did. It did seem a bit hard on them when the others were going to be luxuriating in a good hotel in a lovely town that they should be in a hostel in an industrial city. I thought the least we could do would be to give them slightly better rooms.'

'But the only reason they were in that hotel in Bordeaux is that it is run by a friend of someone in the department, and they are giving us a really low price because it's out of season. It's not costing any more than the youth hostel.'

'Oh dear. Sorry about that Selwyn.'

Selwyn did not think that she looked all that sorry. In fact, she looked rather amused. Suddenly he felt furious.

'Look, Christine. It's not just that you've wasted the department's budget. How the hell am I supposed to have any authority with my staff if you let them come to you behind my back with a sob story and then you alter my decisions without even having the courtesy to discuss it with me first? Really it's just not on, you know.'

Christine did feel a bit rueful. She had made a mistake over the hostel. If she had talked to Selwyn first she would have known the facts, and he did have a point about her undermining his authority. But he needn't stand there looking so aggressive. If he wasn't always so difficult to get hold of, she might have attempted to check with him first. Instead of apologising as she knew she really ought, she counter-attacked.

'Well, it's just too bad. Why don't you explain things to your staff properly, then they wouldn't come running to me. I'm sure Janet would have understood if you had bothered to explain the reason. Instead you just tell her it is not possible to improve the Spanish accommodation. And as for undermining your authority – it's pretty well impossible to get hold of you – you're never in your office – and sometimes I just have not got the time to keep trying. I do have other things to do as well, you know, as does my secretary.'

Once Selwyn had gone, Christine calmed down and began to wonder why she was behaving so aggressively that morning. In both situations she had been at fault but not prepared to take any of the blame. She resolved to be nicer. In the corridor, she got the chance. Ian was walking past and stopped to comment on the weather. It was very apparent that he had something

troubling him, for he lingered looking quite distressed and so Christine asked him what was wrong.

'Well, I'm just feeling a bit ashamed of myself, I suppose. I was in the staffroom collecting some papers and I overheard two people being really homophobic. They were actually being incredibly offensive. I should have said something to them, but I didn't know how to tackle it so I walked away. I suppose they would have said it was a private conversation anyway. I still feel guilty though.'

'I can see how you feel,' replied Christine. 'But you can't deal with everything, Ian. You are really good at dealing with people, you know. I've often noticed that. You are sympathetic but firm. I wish I had that ability. When I want to be firm I end up getting ratty, and I know I don't praise people nearly enough for what they've done. I just find fault. Still, I'm going to try to reform.'

After Christine had returned to her desk, her chance to do so came almost immediately. A technician from the printing department arrived with proofs of some marketing literature he had prepared. The leaflets did look very attractive, and she wanted to praise him for them, but her words did not come out very well.

'Thank you Peter, I really appreciate the good work you do in the print room.'

It did not register much of an impact on Peter. That sounded a bit patronising, he thought, and very generalised. Was it meant for him or the whole printing department? He cynically decided she must have been on a recent management course and been told to praise people's work more. Pity she did not have much knack at doing it.

## Discussion

No one in the above dialogues managed their situation with any skill, and though the behaviour exhibited was not particularly bizarre or venomous it led to very unconstructive outcomes. No one was left in a good state. Saffron and Selwyn were angry, Christine was defensive and feeling guilty, Peter was puzzled.

This was not necessary at all. Why did it happen? There were two activities being pursued in the exchanges; one was confronting someone with a critical statement, the other was giving someone an appreciative message. They both require skills in order to accomplish them effectively. Without skilled action, the best we might hope is that nothing much registers with the recipient, and the worst and most likely is that we leave a trail of emotional wreckage of the type exhibited by Christine, Saffron and Selwyn.

## THE SKILLS OF CRITICAL FEEDBACK

When we are faced with the need to confront other people critically about their behaviour, how do we do that without giving unnecessary hurt to them, embarrassment to ourselves, or compromise the essential substance of the criticism? It is a minefield and many people avoid the danger by not confronting people unless they are absolutely forced to. We have to accept that there is not any way in which we can give critical feedback and expect the recipient or ourselves to feel happy about it. What we are aiming at is an exchange in which we feel relatively comfortable and the recipient is able to hear the message without experiencing aggressive attack or being hooked into feelings of anger or fear. The exchange is not to satisfy our own need to get things out of our system or wallow in self-righteousness. It is to help ourselves and the other person to clean up a relationship or situation which is contaminated in some way.

We need to start with some guidelines.

1. Provided that we present our criticism as fairly, skilfully and sensitively as we can, we are not in the end responsible for the behaviour of the recipients. It is their choice how they react to criticism, and if they are angry or upset about it, the givers should not feel guilty about that.
2. Making judgements about other people is counter-productive. Statements such as, 'You never think things out properly', or, 'You always rush into things without preparation', are of no help to the recipient and are only likely to annoy him or her.
3. Labelling people by name or trait is not legitimate behaviour. It would be difficult to justify by analysis any label given. Furthermore labelling is counter-productive in that it is likely to activate strong feelings in the other person which will lead to rejection of the message being given. Statements such as, 'You are too authoritarian', 'You are so old-fashioned', 'You are just plain irresponsible', need to be avoided.
4. It is unhelpful to attribute motives to other people. There is no way in which we can know the motives of others. They are certainly likely to be much more complex than can be encompassed in a single accusation. Statements such as,'You can't be bothered', 'You are only interested in the money', 'All you want is quick promotion', are unjustified by any criteria.
5. The focus should be on the value of the feedback to the receiver, not the release of feelings by the provider. It would be unrealistic to pretend that there is not sometimes some release of frustration, but that is not where the focus should lie.
6. The aim of feedback should be to give the receiver specific information that is publicly available for consideration; i.e. it is not inferred, it is

not judgemental, but it is behaviour that was observable. Thus feedback should concentrate on:

- what the recipient did;
- what he said (not why he said it);
- objective observations (without making inferences);
- what the provider thinks happened;
- giving any other relevant information.

7. As a general rule, statements should be 'more or less' rather than black and white and tentative rather than certain. 'You don't seem very worried' is a very different statement from 'You never care about anything or anyone'.
8. As part of the giving of specific information, the provider can reveal his or her own feelings. 'I am angry about ...' 'I am frustrated by ...' Disclosure of feelings is an essential part of confrontation techniques, but this must be done so it is not manipulative of the other person. Its purpose is not to make her feel guilty or stupid. It is a statement about you not about her, and it is presented simply as a fact in the situation. If feelings are not freely disclosed, they will appear covertly in the exchange and contaminate it in some way or other. If, for example, you are very angry about someone's behaviour and suppress this when talking to him about it, it is unlikely the course of the exchange will be honest and straightforward, nor the outcome constructive.
9. Feedback should not be presented so apologetically or so wrapped up in qualifying or conditional statements that the message is lost. Good feedback is not aggressive, but it is to the point.
10. Feedback should lead to a negotiated outcome whenever possible and should therefore contain a statement of desired change. As part of the exchange it should normally invite comment, which the recipient may or may not choose to give, on his reactions to the feedback.

Christine and Selwyn failed to keep to these ground rules at several points.

Christine used the occasion to get rid of her annoyance, which was apparent in her choice of language and no doubt in many non-verbal signs, rather than to give useful feedback to Saffron.

She made no attempt to negotiate but just finished with the abrupt statement, 'You will have to redo them', thus ensuring that, whatever else, they would not be done with enthusiasm and high quality.

She made judgements in such statements as, 'You seem to have ignored all that', or, 'I thought it was quite clear'.

She used black and white language throughout – 'quite clear', 'spent ages', 'all that'.

Selwyn initially presented his feedback in far too apologetic a manner, and came at it obliquely. Only when Christine did not respond with sufficient concern did he state what he really wanted to say – that he did not like his decisions being countermanded and his authority sabotaged.

He was very angry but chose initially not to state that. Instead his anger came out in an unpremeditated outburst that was expressed in language such that, almost inevitably, Christine responded in kind.

How could they have done it better? The following is a formula for effective feedback. It is the *seven stage message*.

Stage 1. Ask if the other person is prepared to listen to some feedback you want to give.

Stage 2. State the positive aspects of the other person's behaviour or work.

Stage 3. Objectively identify and state the other person's behaviour about which you have concern.

Stage 4. State the tangible effects of the behaviour on yourself or others.

Stage 5. State how you feel about that.

Stage 6. Request the behavioural change you want.

Stage 7. Invite the other person to respond.

This is a model, and like all models will not suit all situations without adaptation. For some confrontation situations it may not be relevant to indicate a behaviour change or to invite a response, but in most cases it will be, and on occasions there may not be tangible effects that are distinct from one's feelings. It is not always possible or appropriate to start with a positive statement. However, if these stages are followed, with whatever adaptations seem appropriate, then there is likely to be a successful outcome.

Let us replay the first two of the encounters at the beginning of this chapter.

Christine has asked Saffron to see her with the sketches she has done. As she looks through them she realises that they are not within the brief that they had agreed together.

'Saffron, I need to give you some honest reaction to these. You have clearly worked very hard at them and the quality looks to me very good, so I really appreciate that. They are not, however, within the brief we agreed, and I am rather put out that we spent so much valuable time – yours and mine – to agree on something that you seem not to have carried out. I would like you to have another go at them, but do you need me to explain anything that was not clear, or is there anything you want to say in comment?'

Saffron was a bit upset that her hard work had come to nothing, but Christine did seem to appreciate that, and she had actually gone right outside the agreed brief to follow one of her own ideas. It was a chore but she had better have another go at it.

'I'm sorry you don't think they are suitable – and you're right, they did take a long time. But I can see now they are not quite what we talked about. Tell me again what you want, and where these fall down, and I'll re-do them.'

Christine and Saffron had a brief technical discussion, and when Saffron left, both felt they had handled the situation well and professionally.

Of course, there was no reason for Christine to assume Saffron would respond constructively, but the way she delivered her criticism made it much more likely.

Then Selwyn arrived.

'Christine, I need to talk to you about something important. Can you give me some time now to hear what I have to say.'

'Yes, of course. Is it serious?'

'Yes, it is. I appreciate the close interest you show in the work we do, particularly the more risky things like overseas work experience. I like having your support.'

'But when you countermanded my decision to Jenny about the accommodation for the Spanish work experience visit, this made me very angry. It destroys my managerial authority with my staff, and in this instance it has also cost us extra money we could not afford. I would like you in future to check with me before you change my decisions. Will you do that?'

'I'm sorry Selwyn. You're right of course. But it did seem a bit unfair some students were in a comfortable hotel and others in a hostel.'

'That is why it is so important to check with me. If you had known the reasons behind that I am sure you would have been comfortable with my decision, but what I want you to agree to is that whatever my staff come and say to you, you will not reverse my decisions without first seeing me about it. I know I am not always easy to get hold of, but on this matter it is important enough to me to ask you to persevere or go along with my decision.'

'Okay, that's fair. Check me if I start doing that again.'

Confrontations such as these must of course be done with perception and sensitivity to the person and occasion. It is important to choose carefully the time and place. Sometimes it has to be given immediately, on other occasions it is worth waiting a short time. There will be occasions when it is worth staying around to explore responses, there are others when it is more appropriate to walk away immediately. Each situation has to be judged separately. Nevertheless the general strategy remains unaltered. Confrontation feedback involves:

- his/her behaviour, not his/her character;
- your problem and needs, not his/her problem and needs;
- your request, not your invitation to combat.

For practice, you might consider how you would deal with the following situations.

1. You have found the behaviour and contributions of a colleague very unconstructive in a working party you share.
2. You are the recipient of sexist remarks from a colleague of the same or opposite gender.
3. You find the way your secretary greets your visitors very unhelpful.

## Skills of giving appreciative messages

There is some skill in expressing appreciation to someone. However it is done, it will generally do some good, but its impact can be much increased if it is done well. The least effective way of expressing appreciation is by very globalised or very general messages. 'You're doing a grand job', or, 'You've all done very well on the project', are pleasant statements to receive but are too abstract and remote to be very highly valued. The message that has maximum impact is one:

- that is addressed to one specific person;
- that indicates the specific behaviour or situation which you value;
- that indicates the tangible effect it has had on you;
- that expresses your feelings about the other person.

For example: 'I'm very grateful to you for taking my lecture yesterday. It enabled me to complete a difficult interview successfully and I am very happy about that,' is clearly going to have more impact than: 'Thank you for all you've done'.

It is repetitive but nevertheless important to emphasise once again that body language should be totally congruent with the verbal message. To express appreciation of a specific action while gathering up your papers, looking at the clock, or gazing out of the window takes away half of the effect.

If we now consider Christine's attempt to express appreciation, we will see how she fails to use sufficient skill.

In her attempts to be 'nice' to Ian she listens carefully to him, but then takes away the effect in two ways.

First she does not acknowledge the bad feeling he is expressing. Simply to say 'You can't do everything' and then give him a rather flattering appreciation message is likely to leave him confused. He needs to have his concerns discussed, rather than a palliative such as 'Don't worry about it.'

Second, she spoils the effect of her appreciation of his skill with others, by moving the conversation away from his skill towards her own state, and half the conversation ends up by being about herself. After 'You're sympathetic but firm' it was time to close.

When she wished to express her appreciation of Peter, the print room technician, her formulation was both general and ambiguously globalised, and it is in such situations that the recipient is most likely to feel it is patronising

or just synthetic praise, even if the giver was genuinely wanting to say thank you.

If we replay both these incidents, the following might have given different and better results.

After Ian's statement, Christine says: 'I can understand you would feel bad about that Ian. It is a difficult one. Perhaps we could put our heads together sometime and see what we could come up with as a way of dealing with that.'

Having acknowledged his problem, she can then go on, 'You're really good at dealing with people, you know. I've noticed that often – with Jim's problems for example. You're sympathetic but firm. It's really good working alongside someone like that.'

With Peter, she can be short and specific:

'Peter, these proofs you have done look really good – and I do appreciate very much the effort you make to get them to me as quickly as possible. That helps me a lot, so thank you.'

## Receiving messages

The skill of receiving appreciation messages is not to discount them or push them away, but to accept them. The easiest way to do this is to look the giver in the eye, smile and look pleased, and say 'Thanks. That's good to hear', or some similar phrase. (The various ways in which people habitually push away appreciation messages are recounted in The Staff College companion volume: **Transactional analysis in management**, Hewson and Turner 1992.)

You may, of course, decide not to accept a message as it stands because you feel it is manipulative or crooked, or is given without any real thought. You may indeed find the message offensive and assertively reject it. For example: 'You have a gorgeous body'.

'That remark makes me angry. I want to ask you not to make remarks about my physical appearance.'

If you feel that the appreciation message is given with good will but without sufficient thought, you can pursue it assertively which will have the effect of giving you a clearer idea of what it is the other person appreciates and at the same time help him learn to give messages more skilfully. For example: 'You're doing a grand job.'

'Thank you. What is it in particular you think I am doing well? It would help me if I knew that.'

This response exposes the manipulative message of appreciation and expands the real but half-expressed appreciation message.

## SUMMARY

1. Avoiding giving critical confrontation messages will probably create more difficulty than giving them.
2. If the messages are based on the guidelines, then whatever the response, the giver will have done his or her best professionally.
3. Use the seven part message, suitably amended for the circumstances.
4. Giving messages of appreciation also requires skill.
5. Such messages should be specific and individualised.
6. If the message is either manipulative or badly formed, the recipient has the choice of rejecting it, or pursuing it to force the giver to clarify what it is.

# CHAPTER 10

## INTERVIEWING THE MARGINAL PERFORMER

Ian has arranged an interview with one of the secretarial studies staff. He has called the interview because he has received two complaints about her performance of late. The first is a letter from a firm of solicitors saying that their two day-release students who are attending the RSA II typing course have been complaining about the quality of the work and teaching in their classes. One or two other students on the course have been complaining directly to Ian that the teacher has been arriving late, not marking their work, and generally not putting enough effort in. Ian knew that Iris was not a brilliant teacher, but she was not irredeemable and certainly had the ability to be a thorough, if not a particularly inspiring, teacher.

Ian had prepared himself for the task ahead. He had made sure that he would not be interrupted and that he had a clear hour with Iris. When she arrived, she looked rather uncomfortable. Ian thought about enquiring about her son, who he knew had just joined the navy, but resisted the temptation to put her at ease in that way. Instead he smiled at her, thanked her for coming, and pulled a chair up to his side for her.

'I have had a letter from Prachitt and Coulson saying that their day release students feel they are not gaining much by attending your typing classes, and a couple of other students have mentioned that their work is not being corrected for a long time, and that you are often late for classes,' began Ian.

Ian paused for Iris to answer. She might deny the allegations; she might become tearful or emotional. If she did either, he would probably have to postpone the interview until either he had checked the evidence again, or she had calmed down sufficiently. Since Iris did not respond, and so presumably accepted the facts he had stated, he gently enquired, 'What's the problem?'

'It's the room I've been allocated. It's awful. No one would want to work in there,' replied Iris.

'Yes, it is a poor room, but is that the whole problem?'

'Well, it's enough, isn't it?'

'If we gave you another room, I'm sure you would like that, but would it really get rid of the complaints of employers and students?'

'It would be great, but no, I don't suppose it would.'

'So, Iris, is it the real problem?'

Iris paused for some seconds and Ian resisted the temptation to say anything else.

'I find the work boring, I suppose. I have been doing it for years, and quite honestly, I wish I had stayed in an office instead of coming into education. It's just the same thing, year after year.'

'I see. Tell me, are there any other reasons for you to be feeling like this?'

'No, nothing important. It's just the general tedium.'

'Okay. So you find the work you are being asked to do boring. Can you think of ways that would make your work more interesting?'

'How can you make teaching typing interesting?'

'There might be something that would revive your interest. If there were, what would it be?'

'I don't know.' Iris paused. 'Perhaps I could have a more varied range of classes. I'm qualified to teach other areas, apart from typing. I did office skills until a couple of years ago, and I really enjoyed that.'

'Do you think that would really be the answer for you, then?'

'Why yes, I hadn't really thought of it before, but I do think it would help.'

'Would you do it, if I timetabled it in next term?'

'Yes I would. Thanks,' replied Iris more enthusiastically.

'And would that rekindle your enthusiasm?'

'Yes, I'm sure it would.'

'Good,' said Ian. 'Is there anything else that could be done to improve things until the new academic year starts? I don't think we can change your classes until then.'

'Well, I did see a short conference advertised – 'new approaches to teaching' – which was aimed at staff in secretarial studies. It might give me some ideas about how to inject a bit more life into my teaching.'

'That sounds like a good idea. Let me know more about it. We haven't got much money in the kitty, but it's some time, I think, since you did any training, so I think we can justify it.'

'That's very nice of you. I really think it will help.'

'When can you get the information to me?'

'I can have it on your desk tomorrow.'

'Is there anything else that can help improve things immediately?'

'It's up to me really, isn't it? After this talk, I think I'll do things with a bit more enthusiasm.'

'Is there any way I can support you in that – for example, would you like to have a chat every fortnight to see how it is going?'

'Yes, that would be fine. I guess I need someone to keep me up to the mark with these classes.'

'Right, the solutions are to get you a more varied range of classes next term, to arrange for you to attend a conference to get some new ideas, and

to have a regular chat about how things are improving. Shall we commit ourselves to that?'

'Yes,' said Iris positively.

'Shall we just make a written note of what we have agreed, so you can keep me to it? I am sure that once you feel better about your work, your performance will get back to normal. Thanks very much, Iris, for giving me your time to have this meeting, and for being so willing to find a solution.'

## Discussion

There are occasions when a manager needs to do more than simply give someone a critical feedback message, as described in Chapter 9. If a member of staff seems to be performing below his or her normal standard, and this is causing a problem, then the manager may need to set up a marginal performance interview. This is not a disciplinary interview. It works on the following assumptions:

1. the staff member is capable of acceptable work. The present state is assumed to be temporary;
2. the causes of the marginal performance are not necessarily under the control of the staff member. The prime cause may be someone else's fault, or a systems failure;
3. the purpose of the interview is to enable marginal performers to find a solution which they accept as something that will solve the problem, they are committed to and will do.

The technique of carrying out the interview derives directly from these three assumptions. Ian, who has some skill in this field, demonstrates the key points well.

The strategy he follows throughout the interview is to ask questions and summarise replies. Once he has presented the symptoms at the start, he disciplines himself to facilitate Iris to search for the causes of her performance and for solutions to which she can commit herself. Though the technique looks easy, this is deceptive. Ian has to be careful to avoid giving his opinions, expressing his feelings, or offering his solutions.

The interview calls for high levels of rapport and listening skills, and an avoidance by the manager of any feelings of annoyance, anger or condemnation. If these are expressed either verbally or non-verbally, and it is difficult not to express them if they are felt, then a problem-solving interview is turned into a contest, and the interviewee has little choice but to respond defensively. The plan Ian followed was:

- first to establish the problem;
- second to discover what he and she can and will do about it;
- third to summarise, establish follow up and close.

To accomplish these steps he worked through the following actions:

- greet the other person;
- present the evidence;
- ask 'What is the problem?';
- ask 'What else is affecting the situation?';
- ask 'So the real problem is ...?';
- ask what they can do about it;
- ask 'Will that solve the problem?';
- ask 'What else can be done?';
- ask 'Then the best solution is...?';
- ask 'Can you do it?';
- ask 'How long will it take?';
- summarise the problem, solution and time-frame;
- establish how it will be monitored;
- close with statement of confidence about the solution;
- say thank you.

In the interview with Iris, Ian had a fairly amenable subject who was well aware of her temporary failings, and was prepared to be reasonably co-operative in searching for solutions. This is likely to be the case in many instances in colleges. We will consider shortly examples where the interviewee is much less co-operative and much more prickly. Even in the case of Iris, however, there were plenty of places where Ian could have gone wrong.

Had he been nervous, he might well have spent time asking Iris about irrelevant matters to put her at her ease at the start. That is always a mistake, and simply makes it more and more difficult to switch to the real business.

In presenting the symptoms of a problem, he could have used words or body language which Iris would have felt as an attack on her.

Having been given a relatively trivial reason for her behaviour, the unsuitable room, he could have got into discussion on that rather than seek by further questions the underlying cause.

He could have intervened with suggestions or moved to the next stage when Iris paused for some seconds of thought. If he had, he would probably have lost it for good.

He could have made his own suggestions about how Iris could improve her teaching. She would no doubt have agreed, but would have been uncommitted to the solutions.

He could have accepted her suggestions without checking whether she thought they would work, and whether she would do them.

He could have failed to establish that they both agreed on the problem and the solution.

He could have failed to agree dates for things to be done.

He could have closed without either thanking Iris or expressing his confidence in her.

In fact Ian, by keeping strictly to his game plan, was able to carry out an effective and productive interview with skill.

Of course many interviews will be with more difficult people than Iris, and their course will be longer and more confused. Nevertheless keeping to the game plan will probably be the surest way of reaching some kind of productive outcome.

Let us assume another staff member, Curtis, has been the occasion of similar complaints. When Ian interviews him and presents the same symptoms, his immediate response is angrily to say: 'That's nonsense. I've not been late and students only complain to make trouble and get out of work.'

There is no point in going on until Curtis accepts that the symptoms do in fact exist, and Ian may need to emphasise to Curtis that at this stage he does not know who is at fault, but he does need to have agreement on the facts. It follows that Ian needs more than a rumour or a bit of hearsay on lateness if he is dealing with someone like Curtis. So his response might be: 'Curtis, I am not blaming you or me or anyone at the moment. I just want to agree with you the facts. Now whatever the reason, will you agree that three students have actually been to see me and have actually complained about late return of assignments?'

'Would you also agree that we have a written complaint from Prachitt and Coulson?'

'Would you also accept that I checked your class last week at 9.00 on Monday, on Tuesday at 11.00 and Friday at 2.00 and on all those occasions you had not arrived five minutes after the start time?'

'At the moment I don't want to look at the causes – which might well be beyond your control – simply to agree that these are facts – they happened.'

It may be necessary for Ian to be assertively persistent to get Curtis to accept the facts of the situation. When he has done that, he may well face another blocking strategy from Curtis as he enquires, 'So what is the problem?'

'I'll tell you what the problem is. Ever since we changed over the system six years ago, I've had the worst of the classes. All the best classes were moved into another department, and I never got a look in. Then I was the one who had to do without any secretarial support for two years, just because I was supposed to be the most experienced. The others in my group all got feather-bedded at my expense.'

Curtis is indulging in what the Canadians call gunny-sacking. He is using old injustices as an excuse for his present marginal performance. He may be justified in feeling aggrieved at his past treatment, but it is in the past, and there is likely to be no chance of redress here and now. Ian has to focus Curtis

on the present, and stress that satisfactory performance now is required regardless of past events. This also will require assertive persistence until Curtis lets go his gripes and concentrates on the issues of today.

'I know you had some bad deals in the past,' said Ian. 'We have talked about them before. But I have put right what can be put right now. You have the same secretarial support as the rest of the staff, and the same opportunity to talk to me about which of the classes we still have in this section you are given each year. I am sorry you had a bad spell in the past, but we are here concerned with the present. What is the problem now that is leading to the complaints and behaviour we have agreed is happening?'

Alternatively Curtis might scapegoat other people or circumstances for his failings – his students, colleagues, validating bodies, employers.

'As I said, the problem is the students. They can't be bothered, and then when they get behind they complain to their employer – and he believes them, of course. It's always the teacher who's to blame. And another thing: the changes in the syllabus, and the new recording schedules – it takes up all my time. No wonder I'm sometimes late – following up all the red tape, that's what I'll be doing. It wasn't like this 20 years ago.'

Ian has to keep Curtis focused on the need to deliver to agreed standards, and adapt to changing circumstances as part of his professional job.

'Whatever the changes in the system, and I sympathise with the problems all the section staff have over this, the contract is that you teach for the full hour. Other staff manage to do this. So what is the real problem for you?'

If Ian perseveres until Curtis accepts that the poor performance is not just other people's fault, but is at least partly his own responsibility, then he will need to discuss his own behaviour. His first response might be to offer a problem definition which is superficial, as did Iris in the dialogue earlier in the chapter.

'You're right of course. I can't go on blaming the reorganisation of 1986 for ever, and it's not just all the syllabus changes these last two years. To be honest, I have been spending too much time helping the probationer lecturers – as a kind of mentor, and their gain has been my loss. I can soon put that right.'

Of course this could be true, and Ian might need to explore this to reach the best solution for Curtis and the other staff. But he might also very reasonably be suspicious that it is a superficial response which puts Curtis in a good light and disguises a much more serious problem. So Ian may need to pursue this, until he is sure the real problem is revealed.

In many cases of course, the problem is not the fault or primarily caused by the marginal performer. Ian is using his knowledge of Curtis and his observation of non-verbal behaviour and tone of voice to deduce that Curtis is still using defensive strategies to avoid real discussion and analysis.

Another member of staff in the same position might respond with the strategy of bafflement. Their response to 'So what is the problem?' will be: 'I don't really know. I can't think of anything'.

Ian may, in that situation, need to persevere with prompts such as, 'Is it working conditions?' (or equipment or supplies, systems or procedures, other employee's actions, load or pace of work, various supervisory actions, information, training, me, you, yourself?).

If we can suppose that Curtis has come to a definition of the problem, which mostly concerns matters under his own control, though maybe with some subsidiary systems issues, then Ian may have to work very hard to push him to suggest solutions. If Curtis is reluctant or obstructive in doing this, then Ian may be tempted to suggest solutions himself. Indeed Curtis may deliberately push him towards this because it creates the basis for a manipulation.

Curtis: 'I really can't see what I can do about it. I'm in your hands really.'

Ian: 'I need to know what you think will work, Curtis.'

Curtis: 'You're the expert. You get paid the money.'

Ian: 'I'm here to use my expertise to help us examine the proposals you think might work. You need to be sure they work for you, so I need to know what you see as the way forward.'

If Ian deviates from his line, with someone like Curtis he is lost. Curtis will manipulate him with what in the language of transactional analysis is called an organisational game. The most likely games played will be the two following:

## Game one

Curtis: 'Okay, if that's what you think should be done I will do it. You've got the experience, so you should have got it right.'

Three months later at a meeting to see why things have not improved.

Curtis: 'Well, you can't blame me. I did what you said and it just didn't work. I didn't think it would at the time, but I thought you must know best – being a manager and all that. So what do you think I should try next?'

## Game two

Ian: 'Why don't you talk through your class work with the others in your team – see what good ideas they've got?'

Curtis: 'Good idea in principle – but they simply won't share their own ideas with anyone.'

Ian: 'Would a session with the professional tutor be of any help?'

Curtis: 'What? With Ken ? You must be joking. He's useless – as you well know.'

Ian: 'How about visiting Pratchitt and Coulson and seeing what it is that they are really unhappy about?'

Curtis: 'When could I do that – on a 23 hour teaching load – and who pays the 20 mile car trip? In any case we talked to them last year and they haven't got a clue what they want.'

Every time Ian comes up with a suggestion Curtis will find a reason why it won't work, until eventually Ian simply runs out of ideas. At that point Curtis can say: 'Well if you can't come up with an idea that works how can you expect me to?'

If Ian avoided the pitfalls above, he can take Curtis through the questions in the game plan.

- What can you do to solve this?
- Would it work?
- Can you do it?
- Will you do it?
- When will you do it?
- When shall we meet to check it is working?

There is no easy way of dealing with the Curtises of this world, but Ian's strategy is the most likely to pin him to a workable solution for which he has personal responsibility and which can be monitored.

Marginal performance: the more difficult interview

## Summary

When a manager requires a member of staff to bring his performance up to an acceptable level, this might be done through a marginal performance interview.

A marginal performance interview presumes the following:

- the marginal performance is temporary and can be changed;
- the unsatisfactory nature of the performance is not necessarily the fault of the performer.

The manager follows the strategy of:

- presenting the symptoms without comment;
- discovering from the staff member what the problem is;
- discovering from the staff member what would solve the problem and is practicable and which he or she would carry through;
- committing the staff member to a timetable of action with an agreed time for review.

The above applies to those actions the marginal performer can take. The manager, of course, may well be committing herself also to actions, either related to her own performance or to systems and procedures.

# CHAPTER 11

## BELIEFS: BONDAGE OR LIBERATION?

We may over time develop skills, and wish we had others, but our failure in managing both ourselves and our interactions with other people will most frequently not be through lack of skill but through inappropriate beliefs.

The system of thought known as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) focuses on what it describes as belief systems, the collection of assumptions and beliefs which we carry around inside our heads, and of which we may be largely unaware.

The power of irrational beliefs in affecting the way we interact with others is also central to rational-emotive therapy (RET). Developed by Albert Ellis, it is a way of working with people to decontaminate the irrationality of some internal statement the individual is making which is taking him to destructive operating conclusions.

We can demonstrate this as follows:

Victor has developed a new system of controlling entry of non-registered students into the college and is proposing it is adopted by the Buildings and Grounds sub-committee. Seven of the committee support the proposals, with minor modifications but two are opposed to it, one of whom dismisses it peremptorily.

Victor goes away unhappy even though he has obtained approval for his scheme. He can only think of the two who opposed: they don't think much of me – they don't even like me.

Victor has a belief that he can only think he is of worth and can fully occupy his place in the group if everyone approves of him. So much of his time is spent trying to check what people think of him.

Andrea has completed running a day's staff training, and looks through the evaluation forms. She is disturbed to find that three of the staff have assessed it at only 'fairly good'. She ignores the 27 who have rated it very good or excellent, and goes home worrying about what she can do to improve and feeling bad about having done a poor day's work.

Andrea has a belief that unless everything she does is seen as perfect by every one then she is a failure and will be seen as such.

Fay is an excellent teacher used to praise for her work with students, and has always been very conscientious in her administrative duties. However,

even after training she is unable to reach high levels of competence in interviewing skills – she is average or a bit below that, and has been given feedback to this effect in her appraisal interview. She feels this failure acutely and believes her colleagues now see her as sub-standard.

Fay has a belief that across all the range of the things she does she must be at the very least competent; if she is below average in some area that diminishes her value.

Ian spends much of his time – much more than he can really afford – listening to other people's problems and trying to sort them out. He does not get much pleasure out of it but believes he must do it.

Ian has a belief that you should be upset and concerned about other people's worries and troubles, and if you are not you will be labelled as selfish and unsympathetic.

Eric is very concerned about the college reorganisation. Although he has not lost out he dwells on the possibility that after another few months he will be made redundant. In any case he has long worried about what would happen if he had a disabling car accident, because his wife is an invalid and he is paying for her parents in a private nursing home. On top of that he thinks his house is built on a clay belt and may soon show signs of subsidence.

Eric believes that forewarned is forearmed and so preoccupies himself with thinking constantly about possible catastrophes. For him, this is what responsible people do.

Mike is very upset and depressed. The events in the college over the last year have all conspired to frustrate his hopes and ambitions. He has lost his responsibility post, been put into a new team of people he does not know, and has to teach some new syllabuses.

Mike has a belief that internal feelings of misery are caused by outside events, and there is little he can do to change how he feels.

Sometimes belief systems are helpful, but often they seriously limit our flexibility in responding usefully to situations. They act as shackles on our own potential for skilled response to other people.

We have plenty of evidence of this in the dialogues in the previous chapters of this book.

Jack, the catering technician, has a belief that jargon is a waste of time. People should just get on with their jobs (Chapter 1).

Muriel Edwards has a belief that you cannot criticise the quality of the work of your boss (Chapter 2). She also believes that people do not take any notice of you if you have not got the right status or position – and part-timers definitely have not (Chapter 3).

Ian has a belief that you cannot say no to a reasonable or urgent request, however inconvenient it is for you (Chapter 3). He also believes that grown men should not get tearful and emotional and embarrass others (Chapter 7).

Frankie has a belief that people won't want her interfering in their business (Chapter 8).

Emmeline has a belief that if people don't keep to the regulations, they shouldn't expect me to help them (Chapter 3).

Christine has a belief that if you are under attack, the best thing to do is to attack back (Chapter 9). She also has a belief that if people have made a mistake you should put them right in no uncertain terms, so they keep up to the mark next time (Chapter 9).

Mike has a belief that new young teachers always have difficulties with their classes (Chapter 7).

There is nothing wrong with having any of the above beliefs. Who are we to tell anyone what they should believe?

What is important is not whether the belief is 'right' – it is in the nature of beliefs that they are not likely to be unanimously agreed and supported. What is important is whether they are useful in creating good constructive relationships with others, whether they help us in working mutually together to solve problems and make decisions, and whether they assist in developing an increase in personal understanding and wisdom.

If the beliefs we hold limit or prevent any of those happening, then they are really not good for us.

We can take as an illustration Muriel's belief that if you haven't got the right title or status or position, people will not take much notice of you. While she holds that belief, then she is prevented from seeing and taking advantage of all manner of options that are actually there for the taking. She is disempowering herself, giving extra power to others, and limiting herself to a very narrow range of options. Getting rid of that belief would be very liberating for her. She may well be only half-conscious of how fully she holds the belief and lets it affect her outlook. Belief systems become very internalised and we may all need to look deep inside ourselves to bring them into the light and examine them for their usefulness.

We can make a classification of some of the more common irrational beliefs that cause and sustain emotional disturbance and stress:

- those beliefs which concern those things or people which disgust us, which we condemn automatically and without thought;
- those beliefs which concern things or people of which we are very frightened – in past experience or future conjecture;
- those beliefs which concern our own acceptability to others, through our competence, behaviour, or personality;
- those beliefs which concern our power or lack of power to influence people or events. This includes statements about inevitability or impossibility.

Of course we are not arguing for total pragmatism and a denial of any moral, ethical or philosophical basis to what we do and how we live. It would not be possible in any case for even the most extreme pragmatist to operate without a system of operating beliefs. Our argument is that many belief systems instead of helping people to live how they wish, actually hinder them from doing so, because they are operated without reflection or flexibility. There are two ways of creating more freedom to achieve what we want for ourselves.

First we can treat our belief systems as working assumptions which we constantly examine for their continued usefulness, and apply with flexibility and sensitivity to the situation. In other words we take the opposite end of the spectrum from fundamentalists of all creeds and beliefs. This is the approach that is stressed by NLP practitioners. There is in their literature a list of operating principles, the purpose of which is to prevent any rigidity or blockage in our thinking that arises from our beliefs. It turns some common beliefs on their head, for example:

- failure is an unprecedented opportunity to learn something you wouldn't otherwise notice;
- confusion is the doorway to reorganising your perceptions and learning something new;
- when you realise that the world we live in is entirely made up, then you are free to create the world you want.

Accepting these, not as beliefs but operating principles or working assumptions, enables us for example to change our way of learning by welcoming confusion and failure rather than worrying about it.

The last operating principle is however the critical one. It reads: 'none of the above are true; they do however have consequences'.

In other words, these are not beliefs we blindly follow but working assumptions we test out to see if they are working for us and if they are not we can change them.

The second way in which we can harmonise our belief systems with our life aims is to adopt beliefs that are expansive rather than reductive, liberating rather than imprisoning, creative rather than destructive. We, the authors, work within a tradition of thought known as humanistic psychology, and the assumptions it works on would satisfy the above criteria.

- all people have the capacity for growth to high levels of creative, constructive and satisfying living;
- people have within themselves the power to develop their potential and therefore can take responsibility for that;
- people are capable of choice. What a person does is what he or she has chosen. We are all therefore responsible for ourselves and our behaviour. We cannot use alibis or blame other people;

- a person's growth is hindered if it involves damage to or manipulation of other people;
- growth is facilitated by a person's own self-awareness and understanding of his or her emotions, sensations, thoughts and perceptions;
- a person is a whole, not a collection of parts. Mind, body and emotions can only function as an inter-related unity.

The humanistic psychology approach is therefore particularly concerned with encouraging those experiences which foster self-actualisation, spontaneity, loving, valuing authenticity, personal responsibility; examining how organisations and social structures work and how they can be transformed into places in which people can flourish; and developing in people an understanding of their personal power so that they can take charge of their own life.

In this book we have described a number of skills which will help those working in colleges and other organisations to interact more effectively with their colleagues. In this final chapter we have emphasised the limitations of a purely skills-based approach. We have suggested that those who want to increase their capacity to operate well with others should first look at themselves and only secondarily work on the acquisition of skills and techniques. Until a person has explored and attended to himself or herself – personal fears and anxieties, repressions and phobias, rigidities and stresses, assumptions and belief systems – relations with others will be contaminated and at the best will be less productive and at the worst will be destructive. The first move to go outwards to other people is to go inwards to the self. Our doors of perception open inwards as well as outward.

# FURTHER READING

This guide to further reading identifies a key book for each major area covered in this book, and two or three follow-up books.

It does not cover books which are general introductions to the skills of specific activities, such as interviewing. It focuses on those systems of thought and practice which have been highlighted in the discussion sections of each chapter.

## Transactional analysis

### *Key book*

Hewson, J and C Turner (1992) **Transactional analysis in management**. Blagdon, The Staff College.
The major concepts are explained in the context of situations in an imaginary FE college. It contains a full annotated bibliography.

### *Follow up books*

Stewart, I and V Joines (1987) **Transactional analysis today: a new introduction to transactional analysis**. Lifespace Publications
A full and occasionally demanding introduction to TA that includes some of the latest work in the area.

Hay, J (1991) **Transactional analysis for trainers**. McGraw-Hill
Breaks new ground in looking at the way trainers can use TA in their work. Very applicable to the work of many FE lecturers.

## Neuro-linguistic programming

### *Key book*

Seymour, J and J O'Connor (1990) **Introducing neuro-linguistic programming: the new psychology of personal excellence**. Crucible
This is one of the few British books on the market and is deservedly the best-selling introductory text. It contains a very useful annotated bibliography.

*Follow up books*

Laborde, G (1984) **Influencing with integrity**. Syntony Publishing
Well-written introduction in a business context.

Bandler, R (1985) **Using your brain for a change**. Real People Press
The Bandler-Grinder books are all worth attention, for they chart the development of NLP, but some make it easier for the reader than others. This one catches very well the style, humour and irreverence of the author.

## Gestalt

*Key book (management oriented)*

Clark, N and T Fraser (1987) **Gestalt approach: an introduction for managers and trainers**. Roffey Park Institute (2nd revised edition)
A very clear and succinct analysis of the use of gestalt in management.

*Key book (person and therapy oriented)*

Clarkson, P (1989) **Gestalt counselling in action**. Sage
An excellent text on gestalt in counselling, with very useful examples.

*Follow up book*

Perls, F *et al*. (1984) **Gestalt therapy: excitement and growth in the human personality**. Souvenir Press

## Assertion training

*Key book*

Dickson, A (1982) **A woman in your own right**. Quartet
An excellent book, much better than the various American books on the market. Though it explores assertiveness from the position of women and is a powerful critique of a sexist society, what it says about human relations and assertive living is universal.

*Follow up book*

Back, K and K Back (1990) **Assertiveness at work: a practical guide to handling awkward situations**. McGraw-Hill (2nd revised edition)



107

A common sense introduction focused on work situations. Another British book. We make the point not only because American books use American culture and work settings for their examples, but because there are some differences between British and American approaches to assertion training.

## Rational-emotive therapy (RET)

### *Key book*

Dryden, W (Ed) (1984) **Individual therapy in Britain**. Harper & Row
Chapter by W Dryden on RET. This is a clear and authoritative introduction. The author has written at greater length for those who want to follow RET further.
Note that there are other chapters in this book worth looking at.

## The general nature of human interaction

### *Key book*

Rowan, J (1988) **Ordinary ecstasy: humanistic psychology in action**. Routledge
A leading luminary of the humanistic psychology movement, and a very stimulating thinker.

### *Follow up book*

Schutz, W (1973) **Joy: expanding human awareness**. Penguin Books
Schutz was one of the leaders of the 'encounter movement' in the 1960s and this is a good introduction to his approach.

## General personal interaction

### *Key book*

Honey, P (1990) **Face to face skills: practical guide to interactive skills**. Gower
Peter Honey has been an innovative trainer in this field for many years, and this incorporates much of that experience in a very accessible form. Honey has worked primarily in an industrial climate.

## *Follow up books*

Wymot, W (1975) **Dyadic communication: a transactional perspective**. Addison-Wesley
This is a useful book which concentrates on what happens between two people when they relate and has many points on skills useful in an interview.

Sperry, L and L Hess (1974) **Contact counselling: communication skills for people in organisations**. Addison-Wesley
This has a great deal of practical material, exercises, and cases. It focuses on the manager, and uses a transactional analysis background.

# *Appendix 1*

# *The characters*

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| | |
|---|---|
| Helen Bassenthwaite | The Principal |
| Christine Dolacinska | Director, marketing (business studies) |
| Andrea Heath | Director, personnel vice-principal |
| Frankie Harmer | Director, curriculum |
| Victor Jenkins | Director, resources and buildings |
| Jim Law | Director, forward planning |

## *Members of the School of Business Studies*

| | |
|---|---|
| Ian Standon | Section manager business studies and Co-ordinator of quality |
| Deirdre Lacey | PA to Christine |
| Jean Hole | Office secretary |
| Selwyn Jones | Section manager |
| Lien Tao | Section manager |
| Eric Bond | Section manager |
| Morag MacDonald | Lecturer in secretarial studies |
| Ben Stern | Lecturer |
| Curtis R Ford | Lecturer (union representative) |
| Gavin Pomroy | Lecturer in accounts |
| Fay Branch | Lecturer |
| Janet Meeks | Lecturer |
| Muriel Edwards | Lecturer (part-time) women returners course |
| Iris Abingdon | Lecturer |

## *Teaching staff in other schools*

| | |
|---|---|
| Mike Watling | Catering |
| Saffron Harrington | Art and Design |
| Sally Lister | Psychology – health and community |

*Other management staff*

| | |
|---|---|
| Jack Bradley | Chief catering technician |
| Emmeline Luckhurst | Finance officer |
| Jack Hodges | Head of printing |
| Robin Gillam | Industrial liaison officer |
| Peter McCarthy | Printing technician |

*Outsiders*

| | |
|---|---|
| Janet Muir | Deputy head, Grassmede Comprehensive |



111

# APPENDIX 2

## THE COLLEGE ORGANISATION

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The college has recently been reorganised. Departments have been regrouped into schools within which a number of section managers (generally three to four) take day-to-day management responsibility for a selection of courses. They operate with delegated budgets and are expected to be self-managing and relatively autonomous. The schools are:

Art and design;
Business studies;
Theatre arts;
Catering and hairdressing;
Humanities and science;
Health and community studies;
plus Administration, which though a service function to the rest of the college is treated organisationally as a school.

The Principal is assisted by six directors who have specialised college-wide functions:

marketing;
curriculum;
forward planning;
building and resources;
administration;
personnel (also acts as vice-principal).

All directors except that of administration also have oversight of an academic school (for this purpose Theatre arts joins Art and design), and though they are not expected to exercise day-to-day management or become heavily involved as the top management figure, they are technically line managers to the section managers. However, the directors rotate their positions in the schools every three years to prevent them reverting to traditional head of department roles.

Currently the position is this.

Christine Dolacinska (marketing) Business studies;
Frankie Harmer (curriculum) Catering and hairdressing;
Victor Mortimer (forward planning) Humanities and science;
Andrea Heath (personnel) Art and design/theatre;

Jim Law (resources/buildings) Health and community.

The staff are allocated to schools, and for personnel functions section managers operate as their managers, but for all other matters they are responsible to the relevant manager in the various courses they work in.

The organisation is still settling down. Staff still call the schools departments and the section managers section heads, and there is confusion in the precise roles of section managers *vis-à-vis* directors.

This will be apparent in the text of this book.

113

# *APPENDIX 3*

## *A NOTE ON TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS, NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING AND GESTALT*

This book clearly is a work that draws from our own experience and perceptions. We have not confined ourselves to any one approach – interpersonal skills is above all else eclectic and pragmatic. We believe that to follow only one system of thought is unnecessarily restricting.

Nevertheless we have frequently referred to or drawn on the concepts and application from three well-known schools of thinking, each of which offers its unique explanations of human interaction. These are:

- transactional analysis (TA);
- gestalt psychology;
- neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

We have appended a very brief description of each of these, with information on their organisation and training system in this country.

### TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

The concepts and their application are described and developed in the companion volume to this book: **Transactional analysis in management**, written by Julie Hewson and Colin Turner, and edited by Philippa Andrews (Hewson and Turner 1992).

Transactional analysis was developed in the 1950s and 60s by the Canadian psycho-analyst, Eric Berne. After his death in 1970 his colleagues and students worked on its development and made major contributions both to its theory and practice. It spread from the west coast of the USA across much of the world and by 1980 had become immensely popular as a form of training for interactions or transactions between people. It proved very useful in training employees in how to handle customer and client encounters, and is widely used in training programmes for salespersons and counter staff, receptionists, negotiators, and those responsible for groups of people such as teachers, couriers, youth leaders and residential social workers.

Its focus, as its name suggests, is an analysis of transactions between people. By an extension it also focuses on internal transactions – the dialogues we are having with ourselves.

The form of analysis it has developed is such that one person in a dialogue can identify and choose from a variety of options of response, instead of that habitually taken, and in so doing can get different (and hopefully better) responses from the other person. At this level it is a system concerned with analysing, understanding and improving communications, and its relative simplicity has attracted very many people to it. This may be as far as it goes for many students, and there is nothing wrong with that.

At a deeper level, however, it opens up door after door, taking us deep into an understanding of the personal psyche: hence its attraction to psycho-therapists. The question asked is this. If we now have a system of notating the transactions between people, why do we see that they so often choose transactions which seem to lead to unproductive results – to frustration, breakdown, anger, despair, bewilderment? Why do two people talking together so often mess things up so that one or both are left feeling dissatisfied? This is the agenda that psycho-therapists trained in transactional analysis address, and it can lead to profound insights and major changes in behaviour.

In this volume we have used the TA concepts of: process communication, organisational games, and strokes.

Training in the UK is controlled by the Institute of Transactional Analysis (ITA), but is carried out by individual professionally qualified practitioners on private contracts. The basic introductory training takes two days and is widely available. Further training to achieve the next level of professional qualifications will take a minimum of two years part-time study. There are, however, many courses offered, of varying quality, which are not part of a formal training scheme, and one can develop a considerable understanding of the area just by shopping carefully around.

A recent development has been the setting up of a body concerned with teaching and training – Transactional Analysis in Education and Training (TAET). This has been established specifically for teachers and trainers, will provide conferences and workshops, a newsletter, and eventually will provide a professional training scheme for educationists in schools, colleges and other training institutions.

British Institute of Transactional Analysis,
BM Box 4104,
Old Gloucester Street
London WC1N 3XX

TAET,
Secretary,
93 Highfields,
Shrewsbury

## NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING (NLP)

NLP is a relatively recent phenomenon and is still in the process of early development. It grew out of a collaboration of two professors at the University of California, Richard Bandler, a gestalt therapist and John Grinder, a linguist. From the mid-70s Bandler and Grinder published a stream of books and conducted a series of seminars in which they developed their ideas.

It is not easy to summarise NLP because it asks questions and offers explanations about the total human experience. It is extremely eclectic, picking up any ideas and practice from other systems of thought that seem useful. We can summarise its major concerns as follows:

- it seeks to answer the question, 'what makes the difference between those who are excellent and those who are merely competent?' It is a study of excellence in any area of human activity;
- it is behaviourally based. It seeks to find out what the person of excellence actually does to make the difference;
- it assumes we can all be excellent, if we understand what we need to do, and that requires modelling of excellence, i.e. understanding and then practising the precise and effective patterns of behaviour used by those of excellence.

Its training therefore includes:

- heightened observation skills of others' behaviour;
- a concentration on new strategies for achieving the outcomes we want;
- flexibility in our own behaviour, using behaviours which seem to work for others, and seeing if they work for us, but always having a variety of options to choose from;
- an awareness of the way in which we create blocks for ourselves – by belief systems, by the way we frame our perceptions of the world, the way we repeat behaviours we know do not work for us – and a decision to find a way beyond the impasse.

As flexibility is such a key part of NLP, there is really no part of human experience it is not likely to visit to see what there is to learn. To this point it is probably true to say there has been a concentration on language and meta language, observation and skill in use of physiology (i.e. body language, etc.), and using past or anticipating future resources of skill or emotional state to achieve desired outcome in the present.

Bandler and Grinder's early work involved minute and precise observation of the skills of outstanding therapists such as Virginia Satir and Milton Ericson, the hypnotherapist, so not surprisingly therapists were particularly attracted to their work, but because what they are really talking about is learning, many teachers have used their techniques, sometimes as generalised techniques in the process of communication, sometimes in specific skill training such as conquering spelling phobia, or learning a foreign language.

Training has until recently been an extension of Bandler and Grinder's own organisations in the USA, but it is now becoming more institutionalised in the UK.

Working to an intermediate diploma takes about 16 days and to a practitioner's certificate about 24 days. To progress beyond that to the level of Master Practitioner will take some extended time and may require travel to the USA.

There is now an organisation in the UK concerned with the proper development of NLP, particularly in training programmes: the Association for Neuro-Linguistic Programming (ANLP).

The address of the information and administration office is:
48 Corser Street
Stourbridge
DY8 2DQ
Tel: 0384 443935

The leading NLP training organisation is:
John Seymour Associates,
17 Boyce Drive
St Werburghs
Bristol BS2 9XQ
Tel: 0272 557827

We have used in this book from NLP the concepts of the meta model, physiological matching, visual/auditory/kinesthetic accessing, and reframing.

## GESTALT

Gestalt approaches are derived from the cognitive and perceptual psychology of Kohler and Koffka. As a form of therapy it was made very popular by the charismatic figure of Fitz Perls, and by name or not has profoundly influenced the work of most therapists and counsellors. Its major principles are as follows:

1. We experience life as patterns (gestalten) of activity and perception. We have a primary drive to complete or close the patterns and our various problems are caused in part by failure to achieve completion, so we carry unfinished business around with us.
2. The concept of the complete pattern extends to the individual human organism. The body, the mind and all our associated feelings, perceptions, emotions and thoughts form one pattern. We have a tendency to break this pattern into discrete parts, to split ourselves, and suffer in that process.

3. The individual is a part of his or her environment and cannot be understood apart from it. We either keep good contact with our environment or interrupt it in some way, and generally suffer from that.
4. Gestalt therapists work not with historic past or projected future but what is happening in the 'here and now'. It is very much about present awareness and a large part of its training is helping the individual become totally aware of what he or she is experiencing at that moment – awareness of the outside world, the physical sensations of the body, and the feeling of emotions.

Gestalt therapy has its own unique techniques of working. These include the use of dreams, fantasies, imagery, drama and art as a way of getting in touch with unfinished business; and devices for encouraging the individual to engage in a dialogue between split parts of his character – for example, a part that is very moral and responsible and a part that is violent.

As with NLP it is a very flexible approach. It responds to the individual and the environment at that time, so whatever seems useful at that time to bring him more into awareness of his environment, his sensations and his emotions is used. A number of books on gestalt reproduce therapy sessions, and are a good way of getting the flavour of gestalt at work. One of the most famous, and also idiosyncratic, is Fitz Perls' book, **Gestalt therapy verbatim**.

In this book we have used the concept of the cycle of contact and interruptions to contact.

Training takes place in a number of institutes, and is generally of at least two years' part-time study. There is no national controlling body, but institutions held in high respect include:

Metanoia Psychotherapy Training Institute,
13 North Common Road
London W5 2QB
Tel: 081 579 2505

The Gestalt Centre London
64 Warwick Road
St Albans
Herts, AL1 4DL
Tel: 0727 864806

The Manchester Gestalt Centre
7 Norman Road
Rusholme
Manchester M14 5LF
Tel: 061 257 2202

# INDEX


## A

active listening 22

advice, as counter-productive 72

appearance, effects of 75

aggressive behaviour 40, 87-8

animals, survival senses 78, 79

appreciation messages 89, 94
  receiving 95

assertion training 42, 114

assertive behaviour 40, 44
  as response to criticism 62, 63

assertive rights 41-2, 60

atmospheres 74

attack, as criticism response 58

auditory metaphors 15, 16

auditory predicates 17

awareness 78
  blocks 79-81

## B

bad service, combating techniques 43-4

Bandler, R 52, 123

behaviour rules 84

belief systems 107-11

Berne, E 121

body language 18-19, 22, 23, 94
  (see also physiological matching)

breathing patterns 19

British Standard 5750 8, 11

'broken record' technique 43-4, 45-6

## C

caution, intuitive 85

chair position, in office setting 75

change, in interpersonal relationships 73

childhood influences 79-80

choice, in individual rights 42, 54, 110

clothes, effect in interview situations 75

college managers 8-9
  communication skills 23-4
  dialogue failures 21-4,68-71, 87-9, 94
  dress 75
  room settings 74-5
  self perception 111

college principal, tasks 8

communication analysis 122

communication challenges 52-5

communication failure 21-2, 23 4, 29-32, 39, 68-71, 87-9, 94

communication process, impact of room atmosphere 74

communication skills 23-4

compassion trap 42

compromise 44

confidentiality, in interviews 72
confluence 81, 85
confrontation 91, 92-4
  see also criticism
confusion, as positive state 110
congruence 19, 20
consequences, of operating principles 110
contact behaviour modes 13
contact cycle 82-3
  breakers 84-6
contact language 13-14
contact skills 20
contact strategies 13
conversation scanning 22
counselling 71-6
creative belief systems 110
criticism 90
  aims 90-1
  constructive 62
  deactivating 60
  guidelines 90-1
  seven stage message 92
criticism responses 57-63, 92-4, 101-2
cycle of experience 79, 82-3
  breaking 84-6

## D

defence, against criticism 58, 101-2
deflection of awareness 79, 84
denial, of criticism 57
dependency relationship 76
desensitisation 79, 84
disciplinary interviews 73
disempowerment 52
distancing devices 50

## E

egotism 81, 85
Ellis, A 107
emotional distress, dealing with 68-9
encouragement skills 23-4
environment, impact on the self 79
evaluative interview response 75, 76
excellence, analysis of 123

## F

facilitating problem solving 72, 75-6
failure, as opportunity 110
feedback skills 90-2
feelings disclosure 91-2
  (see also emotional distress)
fogging technique 60-1
furniture position, in room atmosphere 74-5
further education colleges, reorganisation 7, 119-20
further education courses 8

## G

gestalt psychology 79, 114, 124-5
good nature, as communication problem 39
Grinder, J 52, 123
guilt
  over criticism 90
  over refusals 45
gunny-sacking 101

## H

hierarchic roles, manipulative use of 70
human experience 123
humanistic psychology 110-11, 115

## I

individual rights 41-2, 45

information deflection 84

initial contact 12-13

internal customer chain 11

internal services provision 11

interpersonal communication contact cycle 82-3
  breaking 84-6

interpretative responses 75, 76, 80

intervention responses 75-6

interviewing skills 99-103

interviews
  interruption 69-70
  misinterpretations 70
  management of 71-3
  modes of intervention 75-6
  setting 73-5
  superficiality 69

introjection 79-80, 84

irrational beliefs 107, 109

## J

jargon 11, 12

judgmental statements 90

## K

kinesthetic metaphors 14,16

kinesthetic predicates 17

## L

labelling 90

language modes 14-16

language use, in interpersonal exchanges 49-52

life experiences
  gestalt approach 124
  positive 111

linguistic deletion 53

linguistic distortions 53

linguistic generalisation 53

linguistic strategies 52-54
  (see also fogging technique; negative enquiry technique)

listening 22
  negative 27

listening skills 26-7, 99

listening traps 25-6

## M

manipulation 45, 61, 95, 103

marginal performance interviews 99-103,105

marketing 8

meetings 77
  awareness blocks 79-81

mental messages 80

meta model 52-3

modes of contact 13

motive attributing 90

## N

negative enquiry technique 58, 61-2

negative reaction 73

neuro-linguistic programming 20, 52, 107, 110, 113-14

non-committal interview response 75, 76

non-directive facilitating 72

## O

office environments 14-15, 73-5

openness, in personal interviews 72

operating principles 110

organisational games 103-4

## P

passive behaviour 40

passive listening 22

Perls, F 124

person, as a whole 111

personal beliefs influence 45, 107-9, 110

personal growth and development 110-11

personal problems 65-8, 76
- intervention modes 75-6
- interview objectives 71
- interview preconditions 72
- interview strategy 72
- interview techniques 68-71
- over-identification 71

personal responsibility, in interpersonal exchanges 50, 54

physiological matching 18-20

platitude use 69

positive life experiences 111

presenting problem 68-9

probing interview response 75, 76

problem identification 71, 72

problem ownership 33-5

problem resolution 76

problem response choices 35-6
- flowchart 37

problem situations 29-33
- perceptions of 76
- positive responses 82-3
- reality contact interruptions 78
- (see also personal problems)

problem-solving cycle 82-3

process communication 20

procrastination 80-1

projection 80, 84-5

## Q

quality assurance 8

Quality Co-ordinator 8, 11

## R

rapport 18-20, 99

rational-emotive therapy 107, 115

reality, maintaining contact 77-9

refusal techniques 45-7

respect, as individual right 42, 73

response
- positive 82
- to criticism 57-8
- to situations 79-81

retroflection 80-1, 85

## S

scapegoating 102

self analysis 111

separation fears 81

services provision 11, 43-4

situation
- confluence 81
- deflection 79
- desensitisation 79
- egotism 81
- introjection 79-80
- projection 80
- retroflection 80-1

subjective experience 80

submissive behaviour 40
supportive interview response 75, 76

## T

total quality management 11
training
  in gestalt therapy 125
  in neuro-linguistic programming 124
  in transactional analysis 122
transactional analysis 20, 113, 121-2
trust, in personal interviews 72

## V

verbal encouragement 23, 94-5
verbal manipulation 95
visual metaphors 14, 16
visual predicates 17
voice tone, as influence in rapport 19
vulnerability, to criticism 60

## W

women, compassion trap 42
work performance problems 97-9
  (see also marginal performance interview)

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